A woman in a Victorian-style dress, featuring a dark purple bodice and skirt with a long pink sash, and a matching pink shawl draped over her shoulders. She wears a black hat with a gold band and a small red flower. She is looking over a field of wildflowers towards a sunset sky with soft, golden clouds. The title 'A GROOM for BEA' is overlaid on the image, with 'for' in a script font. Below the title is the series name 'the BLIZZARD BRIDES' with a decorative flourish.

LYNN
DONOVAN
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A GROOM
for
BEA

the
BLIZZARD
BRIDES


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Blizzard Brides

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About this Series

And a series similar to it.

For more information and list of books available in this series, go to www.theBlizzardBrides.com

If you love mail order grooms, may I suggest the [Silverpines Series](#)!

“When disaster strikes... the women of Silverpines, Oregon must band together to survive.”

I have three books in this series and my author friends have many more for you to read, plus some companion series as well. Check it out.

[Wanted: Gunsmith](#)

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Introduction

Beatrice Collins is known as the demure and obedient sister of Last Chance's overbearing Pastor Collins. But enough is enough. She's tired of watching as woman after woman has a beau come and her brother refuses to let her send for one, telling her she needs a Godly man, and that God will provide. Maybe He will or maybe God helps those who help themselves. When one of the men come and seems to be forsaken by his bride to be, Bea see's her chance and takes it, even as her brother surprises her with a traveling preacher he's promised her hand too.

Sam Yorkshire's arrival in Last Chance didn't go as planned. His bride is missing or at the very least avoiding him. Yet he can't deny the attraction he has almost instantly to Pastor Collin's sister Beatrice. Only she has another beau. What's a man to do when the woman he wants can't seem to make up her mind? Especially when outside forces seem to be trying to tarnish his reputation in her eyes?

Will Beatrice follow her heart to the man who has captured her attention or will she settle for the hand picked fiancé her brother presented? Can Sam overcome the attack against his character or will he have to watch the woman he's come to desire choose another? Can there be a Last Chance at love for these two or is another to become a groom for Bea?

Chapter One

[001]



December 1878 - Last Chance, Nebraska

Beatrice Collins instantly smiled as another ruggedly handsome stranger wandered into the church. Her smile disguised the envy gripping her heart like a vise. She felt like a piece of iron firmly held in place as the blacksmith hammered it into something beautiful, yet different from its original form.

“Welcome,” Bea choked. His broad shoulders and towering stature tangled her tongue in ways she couldn’t explain. She cleared her throat to loosen her faulty tongue. “Welcome to Last Chance. Who are you looking for?”

Heather Barnes, the town’s midwife and basically ad hoc mayor, and Bea Collins, the pastor’s sister, served the grooms-to-be tea every morning except Sunday. Cookies and muffins were handed out with the tea while the men waited. Bea had baked a fresh batch of goodies that morning, as she did every morning.

It was her job to keep the newcomers occupied until someone, usually Heather or any one of the brides-to-be who were available, fetched the gentlemen’s intended. Bea watched couples come together day by day, even helped decorate the sanctuary for their weddings. She played the piano for their service and played it again to send them off on their honeymoons. Never did any of the women ask her to stand with them during the ceremony that her brother, Pastor Barnaby Collins, performed.

And never did any of the men realize she was an eligible candidate for marriage, too.

What did they think she was, serving tea and sweet treats in the sanctuary where they were instructed to come first, a servant who didn’t deserve a second thought? Or was she just too plain to be considered at all.

There was something different about this man. Bea felt it in her

bones. She just didn't know why. He spoke loudly, as if he were giving a speech, or was he covering up his own lack of confidence? Men were like that, she had learned over the last few weeks. The louder they spoke, exuding confidence and self-assuredness, the more scared they really were. She listened to him, waiting to know which widow she needed to go fetch.

His loudness drew everyone's attention. Even Heather turned to see who was speaking. He walked among the men who were milling about waiting for their woman to come along, slapping them on the back and shaking their hands, like he was welcoming them to a club.

"I tell ya, the woman I marry will be a *good wife* who loves her husband and tends her hearth and home. We will do as the Good Lord said and fill our house with children." He looked around at the men meandering around the sanctuary. "I've got skills. I can provide. I don't know if this two-horse town already has a farrier, but I aim to be the best one in these parts. Last Chance sounds like the perfect place to start a new life, and *my* intended..." He looked down at his letter. "*Hollie Dawson*, is gonna be my *lucky star* that helps me do just that."

Bea saw Hollie in the foyer. She nearly blurted, "There she is, now!" But then she saw Hollie press her finger to her lips as she ducked behind the door in the foyer. She stayed there, hidden. This gentleman who stood before Bea was here to meet Hollie, but it was plain as the nose on one's face Hollie didn't want to meet him.

He strutted around crowing like Sampson, her brother's rooster, about how he wanted a woman who was dedicated to her hearth and home and wanted to bear him *many* children. Truth was, Hollie Dawson had not given Mr. Dawson any children in the several years they had been married, and she hated keeping house. Her heart had been dedicated to that diner Mr. Dawson bought her. She wasn't going to give it up anytime soon. This gentleman was all wrong for Hollie and she for him. That meant that this man would soon realize he was without an intended.

That suited Bea just fine. This just might be the very opportunity Bea had prayed for. So long as Hollie remained hidden from this man, all Bea had to do was convince the horseshoer she was a better match

for him than Hollie. She paused in her thinking. Well, that and persuade her brother he wasn't riffraff.

Bea's mind spun with all sorts of improper ideas.

Chapter Two

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Before sunrise, that morning...

A giant rooster stood over Beatrice. He elongated his neck and lifted his huge, oversized beak with a screech, “Cock-a-doodle-doooo!”

His enormous, flapping wings fanned her face and hair. He leapt from the foot of her bed. Razor-sharp claws slashed toward her, ripping her thin quilt from her shoulder. The cold night air penetrated her thread-bare nightgown.

She screamed, lifting her arms to protect her tender skin from the crazed bird’s outstretched feet. He enveloped her in his blood-red wings, lifting her from the small, narrow bed and leaping to the windowsill.

She struggled to free herself from his grasp, screaming, and thrashing her arms. But it was a feeble attempt to free herself from the bird’s cocooning wings—

Bea sat bolt-straight up in bed. Panting. Crying. Her sheets tangled around her arm, fell to the floor from her thrashing. Her heart beat in her chest as if she’d run a country mile.

It was that dream, again!

It seemed so real, like a memory, but that was impossible. Her heart pounded against her ribs as the dream faded and the reality of her whereabouts strengthened. She was at home where she lived with her brother, Barnaby Collins. She was safe. Pre-dawn’s pinkish-orange lit her room like a small single candle set in her windowsill. Her breathing slowed to a normal pace.

Beatrice slid her feet to the cold floor and stood. Wrapping her dressing gown around her shoulders, she shook the last of the nightmare from her mind and inhaled one final deep breath to alleviate herself of the reoccurring night terror she had experienced since she was a child.

Rising before Sampson, her and Barnaby's real Rhode Island Red rooster, announced the sun's approach to the eastern horizon, she padded along the hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. She hated that rooster, any rooster really, it only stirred memories of that dreaded dream. Sampson's screeching set her teeth on edge and made for a dreadful start to her day.

She never understood. Why this dream? Why her? Why a rooster?

In reality, a rooster couldn't capture her in his wings, and if he did, he couldn't fly away with her wrapped thusly. Unless it had a second set of wings like the cherubim of the Bible... No, it was a ridiculous dream. Made no sense. And yet, it relentlessly haunted her, dictating when she rose in the mornings.

Why couldn't she *grow out of it* as her brother said she would? Once she became old enough to wear a corset and dress as a woman, Barnaby's reaction became harsher when she mentioned the nightmare. She quickly realized she had to keep the truth of it still happening to herself. He became very flustered if she mentioned it, blaming the devil and saying she needed to pray more.

She did pray, all the time—for her brother. He was the only pastor in the small town of Last Chance, Nebraska. They had settled here from his circuit preaching and were happy, for the most part. However, as he grew older, he seemed to grow more bitter. She had no idea why his heart was so acrid. His kindness that she had known all her life grew more distant with each passing year. But when the freak snowstorm took the majority of men to be with the Lord, her brother's heart hardened as solid as a block of ice.

She watched him become a tyrant to the widows and orphaned women the storm left behind. Demanding they find husbands immediately or leave the town they had helped build. It broke her heart to witness the change in him. She spent every opportunity she could on her knees praying for her brother's heart to be more tender to those who survived the horrible and sudden storm last September. What was it that made him so angry?

Was it fear?

Or was it something else?

She didn't know and couldn't get him to tell her. He was the town's only hope for salvation, he reminded her, and had a spiritual obligation to tend the flock to the best of his ability. She understood that, of course, but why did it make him so cranky?

She longed for the man he used to be when she was younger and they lived a nomadic life, preaching the gospel and traveling across the western territories. She was so happy when they settled in Last Chance. With a name like *Last Chance*, it seemed they had found where they were meant to be. Orphaned herself, she didn't even remember their mother or father. Only Barnaby, who had raised her the best he could while saving souls one small settlement at a time.

Pastor Barnaby Collins prided himself on rising with the first cock-a-doodle from the obnoxious bird. Of course, he didn't have the terrifying nightmare to taint his perspective of a rooster's crowing. He didn't know the real reason why she beat him downstairs. She hoped he reckoned she simply had assumed her role as caretaker of their home and rose early to go about her morning duties. Especially now that she was helping Heather Barnes with the influx of new grooms.

In her slippers and dressing gown, she rushed to the kitchen to mix together three different batches of cookie dough and two muffin batters. She put on the coffee to boil and placed three trays in the oven. A few minutes later, when the cookies were done, she arranged them in round tins, set them beside her muffin baskets, then gathered the chicken eggs before her brother even lifted his head from his weekly washed, sun-dried, and hot-iron pressed pillowcase.

After gathering the eggs, she cracked two into each bowl of batter and stirred them in quickly. Pouring the batter into the muffin tins, she popped them into the oven, and ran back upstairs to wash her face, re-braid her hair into a swirl at the top of her head, and slip on her day dress. When she scurried back down to the kitchen, the coffee was dark brown, the muffins were golden on the edges, and the kitchen smelled heavenly. She'd leave two for Barnaby and wrap the others in a tea-towel she placed in the basket and carried to the church.

Barnaby appreciated the results of her new routine. He hadn't allowed her to join the blizzard widows in choosing a letter from the batches that came to their post office, but he didn't stop her from helping serve tea and treats to the men and women who met initially at the church before they dined at Dawson's Diner to get better acquainted.

Blizzard widows— something she had come to label the poor women who lost their husbands in that awful blizzard. It was a harsh moniker, but she never said it aloud. She tied her bonnet and rushed out the door just as Barnaby was coming down.

"Goodbye, brother. I'm off to help Mrs. Barnes at the church!" She called behind her. He never questioned her quick exit. He had forced this issue with the blizzard widows, never thinking once that Bea might have lost someone dear to her heart in that storm. She prayed somehow the Good Lord would work out an opportunity for her to find a husband without directly going against her brother's wishes.

Bachelors were pouring into Last Chance from all over. Surely one of them could become hers.

"You're no widow." Barnaby reminded her whenever she dared to bring the subject up. "Besides, you're destined for a Godly man, not some riffraff trying to pass himself off as a 'good' man."

"But they are good enough for the local widows, why not me?" Bea had tried to argue the point. She learned really quickly it was no use arguing with her brother. His mind was made up and wouldn't change no matter how much she begged or pleaded.

He was determined that mail order grooms were acceptable for Last Chance's women, but not for Pastor Barnaby Collins's little sister. How he thought he was going to find her a Godly man who met his standards was beyond her comprehension. At eighteen, he'd better select a man for her soon, or else she was gonna be an old maid, spinster sister, living with her brother 'til the day she died, with hardly a kiss to mark her experience of true love.



Later that day...

Bea stood in front of the loud, but handsome stranger on what very well could be the threshold of the rest of her life as a happily married woman.

“Sir, my name’s Beatrice Collins. May I serve you some tea and sweets while you wait for Mrs. Dawson?” Bea considered her next words carefully. “Hollie’s generally a busy woman, and... and we’ll send someone to fetch her right away.” She hoped the lie wasn’t as obvious to this man as it was to herself.

Hollie had left with another man. Two of those three sisters had seriously mixed up the balance of these strangers meeting the one who wrote them. Had Hollie now made it three potential grooms who would marry someone other than who had invited them to town?

His eyes sparkled as he met Bea’s. “Sure,” he uttered, obviously confused and fascinated at the same time. Why would he act like that. Bea knew she was nothing special to look at.

Bea poured his tea and set a sugar cookie that she had made on the saucer. “What’s your name?”

“Samuel Yorkshire.” He stood straighter, taller, nearly strutting like ol’ Sampson back in the chicken pen at Barnaby’s house. Bea smiled up at him. My goodness, he was mighty tall and if he were a farrier, she knew without seeing his muscles, he was a strong and capable man.

“Where’s Mrs. Dawson that she’s too busy to meet me?”

Beatrice swallowed hard. “Um...”

What to say? Truth or half-truth? She knew in her gut this Samuel Yorkshire was all wrong for Hollie. The woman knew it, too, or she wouldn’t have run off with another woman’s intended the minute he entered the foyer. Who was that fellow, anyway?

Bea set her jaw and her mind to tell the truth and let fate fall where it may. “Hollie Dawson runs a diner, over by the stagecoach depot. We’ll have to let her know you’re here, but—”

“A diner?” Mr. Yorkshire looked around, his cocky confidence faltering.

Bea followed his gaze. There were several men here already this morning, still waiting to meet their new brides. They looked uncomfortable trying to hold delicate china cups with their large, calloused hands. Heather flitted like a bumblebee from one gentleman to the next, refilling their cups, compassionately adding a sweet treat to their saucer.

Hollie usually brought sliced sandwiches after the breakfast rush settled down at Dawson's diner, and before the lunch crowd started. Would she forget today, since she was currently occupying somebody else's attentions? What should Bea or Heather do if she brought the food? Point her out to Mr. Yorkshire, or keep her identity a secret until they knew what Hollie wanted them to do about her original intended?

The more Bea thought about it, the madder she became. It wasn't fair! Bea didn't have anyone coming to claim her as his intended bride. How could Hollie have two?

Bea had no one. Just her brother, and he swore on their parents' grave he'd find a suitable husband for her, but would he? She kept his house, cooked his food, washed and mended his clothes, accompanied him during service on the piano, and lived an orthodox life of purity and goodness so as not to embarrass him or stain his good name.

She rolled her eyes. Just thinking about her brother's restrictive rules made her want to run out to the North Platte River and jump in, clothes and all. She'd ride the current as far away from Last Chance as the little river could take her, and find a new life somewhere else. She'd find a good man who wanted to make her his wife. Someone who didn't have to live under the eagle-eye of her brother and his stern standards of right and wrong.

Heather stepped in to address Sam Yorkshire with her usual grace and dignity. "Mr. Yorkshire, it is our hope that you have come here to help the widow who invited you..., eh, with an open mind for who she is and not try to force *your* expectations upon her."

Bea smiled. Heather was so sweet. She had such a talent for kind-hearted diplomacy. Bea took the opportunity as her cue to see if she could wrangle this newcomer into a new idea. One that involved

herself as his intended. He was handsome and stirred a little something in her heart. Maybe she could be right for him. She needed to be careful, not overwhelm him more than he already was. All she wanted was a chance to get to know him better.

“Mr. Yorkshire?” Bea took his arm, gently guiding him to a pew row where they could sit. “Are you aware of the reason behind all you men coming to Last Chance?”

“Yeah.” He muttered, looking worried by her taking him aside. “It was the freak blizzard of last September. It was in all the papers.”

Ah, he was educated. At least he could read. She refocused on what he was saying.

Mr. Yorkshire continued with what he knew. “Nearly every man from around here went out huntin’ and got caught in it. I been caught in a storm or two, I understand exactly what happened. Those early storms can catch ya by surprise.” He chuckled nervously.

“Yes, exactly.” Bea slowly bobbed her head. “And it left our little town with widows and single women, like myself”— she glanced at Heather, but she was busy and hopefully didn’t hear the selfish reference— “who had no prospect of marrying until we invited you bachelors across the nation to come settle here for a grand life along the North Platte River.” Bea allowed herself to feel the cords of muscles lying beneath his long-sleeve shirt. She liked what her fingers shamelessly felt. As she suspected, being a hammer wielding farrier, he was strong.

He tilted his head. “So... so you got a feller coming, too?” His gaze deepened, she saw something similar to pity. That wasn’t where she had hoped to take him with her tale.

“Well, no.” Looking away coyly, she blinked. “You see, my brother—”

“Well now!” As if she’d spoken the devil’s name, himself, Barnaby charged into the sanctuary. “Look at all these eligible menfolk. Welcome! I’m Pastor Barnaby Collins and I just wanted to drop by and introduce myself and let you know when you and your new bride are ready to tie the knot, I’m the man to come to.” He looked around, spying Bea sitting next to Sam Yorkshire and frowned.

“My little sister, over there, will use her Gawdah-given talent to play the piano for your ceremony. Stand up, Beatrice, let the menfolk see who you are.”

Bea died a thousand deaths, blushed red hot as she stood, intertwining her arms, ending with her fingers, like a twisted pretzel.

Sam Yorkshire eyed her curiously. “You’re the pastor’s sister?”

“Yes.” She sat quickly. “I am.”

Before she could utter another word, Barnaby took hold of her arm and yanked her out of the pew. “Come along, little sister. We got work to do in my office.”

She rolled her eyes and glanced at Sam Yorkshire. “I’ll see you around, Mr. Yorkshire.”

Barnaby jerked her to pull her right next to him, but she managed to say one more thing over his shoulder. “Good luck.”

Chapter Three

001



“What do you think you are doing?” Barnaby whisper-shouted at her once they were in his office and the door was securely closed. His voice would be heard in the sanctuary if he allowed himself to truly shout at her, which she knew he would not.

She opened her mouth, but he spoke over her.

“You’re not here to sit with those rowdy men. I allowed you to help Heather pass out tea and cookies, nothing more. You need to get that through your thi— your head. I told you, I’ll see to finding you a husband. We will let Gawdah make him known to us. Not some solicited riffraff from Gawdah knows where. Now tell me you understand, and I will not catch you fraternizing with these range rovers ever again!”

Bea’s temper was boiling hot. “You’re not my daddy!”

He opened his mouth and slammed it shut.

“I can choose my own destiny. If one or two of these grooms-to-be gets abandoned by their intended, I am not wrong to introduce myself to them.”

Barnaby’s eyes bulged and his face flushed so red it was nearly purple, then it blanched ashen, like a dead person. “You most certainly cannot!” he hissed.

“Why not?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“We’ve talked about this! I’m gonna fi—”

“What if I want to find my own husband?” She blurted.

He stared at her, shocked by her unusual boldness. “You can’t. I won’t allow it. I know what’s best for you!”

“I thought you said we’re gonna let God make my husband known to us? What makes you think one of those men out there isn’t the one God brought for me?” She gestured toward the sanctuary.

He pursed his lips, sputtering but not saying anything coherent. “You don’t have any idea what Gawdah has intended for you?”

“And you do?” She challenged.

Again, he glared at her like he had no idea who she was.

She couldn’t blame him, really, she’d never talked back to him like this in her life. He was as much a parent to her as a brother, since they had lost their parents when she was too young to even remember their faces. He raised her, taught her to read and write. He even taught her to play the piano. They carried an upright in the wagon they drove across the western territories until they settled here.

“Yes. Of course, I do,” he said at last.

“How?”

He gawked at her, blinking and getting red faced again. “Because I am a man of Gawdah and I speak to Him daily.”

“So?” She crossed her arms even tighter. “I pray every day, too. What if God helps those who help themselves? *What if* he tells *me* who he has chosen for me? Like Samuel knew David was the chosen King of Israel!”

Barnaby’s eyes grew even wider. “Do not compare yourself to Samuel!”

“I’m not. I just meant, if God could tell Samuel who he chose for the next king, why can’t He tell me who is my intended for marriage?”

Silence gave Bea hope that she’d finally gotten through to her brother. But that hope soon became a deflated dream.

“Because *I* am an ordained pastor.” He pounded his chest with a balled-up fist. “*You* are not.”

“No, but—”

A tap on the door stopped her. Heather’s voice quietly seeped through. “Is everything alright in there?”

Bea glared at her brother.

He glared at her.

Heather gently and slowly opened the door. “Pastor Collins, we could really use some help out here.”

“What is it, Mrs. Barnes?” Barnaby said through clinched teeth and closed eyes.

“I, uh, have more grooms than brides. I could really use some help finding our gals who sent for these fellows. And, Bea, I would

appreciate you running down to the diner to see if Mrs. Dawson will be bringing over some sandwiches. These fellows are pretty road weary and mighty hungry.”

Barnaby narrowed his eyes at Bea and adjusted his tone to address Heather. “Yes, of course. We’ll be right out.”

Bea turned to walk away, but Barnaby grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him. “You watch yourself, young lady!” he hissed.

“I am eighteen. *You* cannot tell me what to do!” She lifted her arm out of his grasp and turned on her heels to walk out. His stunned expression branded in her mind as she looked around for Mr. Yorkshire.

He was gone.

[OBI]



Bea looked all around outside as she walked to her house. Heather had asked her to go find out what Mrs. Dawson wanted to do about Mr. Yorkshire, but before she tracked Hollie and that other fellow down, Bea wanted to put on a better dress than this ordinary day dress she’d slipped into without thought this morning. If Mr. Yorkshire did end up being an abandoned groom, Bea wanted to look her best when she informed him of his new status.

Entering her home, she rushed upstairs to her room and sat at her vanity table. Gazing at her reflection, she unwound her braid and let her hair fall down over her shoulders. Gently lifting her mouse-brown hair, she wondered, not for the first time, if her mother had this color hair and how she made it look beautiful. Bea was plain and her hair dull, but she always imagined her mother had lovely flowing hair that caught the sun just right with golden strands mingled in among the chocolate brown.

Bea lifted her hairbrush and counted one hundred strokes. Wishing she knew how to twist and weave her hair like the girls at church did, she re-braided it and pinned the braid in a circle at the crown of her head. Tugging the side bristles of her brush at the edges of her hairline, she loosened some wisps to softer her face. Looking longingly at her pale reflection, she smiled with a devilish thought.

Easing out the middle drawer, she reached way back into the back and found a tiny jar of rouge that Winnie Gail had given her last summer. Winnie had died in the storms. Frozen to death along with her baby girl, Juniper. Her older sisters, Hollie, Linda, and Becca lost so much during that storm. How tragic! Winnie had been very sweet to Bea. She had given her this rouge to ‘touch up’ her cheeks and lips with a little color.

Bea had always been too afraid of how Barnaby would react if she painted her face in any way. But today seemed like a good day to start doing what she wanted.

Touching the color, then her cheeks, she gently spread it out across the apple-rounds of her cheeks, then applied some to her lips. She smacked them together and smiled at her image. It looked... sunny. She liked this look for her. Much less drab and plain.

Slipping out of the day dress, she stood before her wardrobe. She had three Sunday dresses and one traveling gown. She’d seldom traveled anywhere since they settled in Last Chance, unless she counted when Barnaby took her to Grand Platte to attend a funeral. The traveling gown was dull grey and served as an appropriate attire for the service. Inappropriate for today’s mission.

She held up the blue dress. It was the prettiest. She crawled into it from the bottom up and fastened the many buttons. Pulling a green ribbon from her spring hat, she found a blue ribbon and tied it on. Placing it on her head and securing it with a hat pen, she looked like she was ready for a summer picnic with a beau.

Maybe it would give Mr. Yorkshire ideas of having an outing with her, even though it was too cool for a picnic today. Grabbing her woolen wrap, knitted by Mrs. Pennington’s talented hands, she rushed back outside to find Hollie and the gentleman she had snatched out of the church’s foyer.

Tuck, the diner’s cook, and only black man Bea knew well, seemed flustered when Bea asked about Hollie’s whereabouts. He muttered something about her losing her gall-dern mind, had lunch with some feller, and left. Dragged Jenny in on her charade, too.

Bea tried her best to make sense of the man’s ramblings. He was

busy keeping up with the orders being presented to his little window by Jenny, Hollie's waitress and ward since the storms. Neither of them looked happy that Hollie wasn't here in the diner helping with the busier-than-usual crowd of customers. All those grooms Bea had left behind at the church must have met up with their intendeds and made their way to the diner as instructed for phase two of their first day together. All except Sam Yorkshire. He must be alone, somewhere. Perhaps he checked in to the hotel?

"Well, I know you're busy, but Heather Barnes sent me over to see about the lunch sandwiches Hollie brings."

Tuck adjusted his bandana around his head, capturing sweat from his brow, and gave Bea an exasperated look. "I doesn't know, Miss Bea. We's awful busy at the moment. If I gets a break from this oven, I'll make y'all some sandwiches and have Jenny run them over."

"That's fair." Bea assured him. "Thank you." She glanced at the number of couples at the tables and Jenny flitting from table to table keeping glasses filled and taking orders. "Looks like the majority of our grooms are here, so we won't need a big pile of sandwiches at the church."

"That's good." Tuck said absently. He was focused on his sizzling food.

Bea nodded. "Well, I'll leave you be. Thank you, Mr. Tucker."

He glanced up and smiled with a quick nod. She returned his gesture and left the diner. Maybe Mr. Yorkshire will return to the church. That's where the men were instructed to go first. She could only hope he did, and that Hollie would not be delivering sandwiches — Jenny would. Bea had the information she needed to appease Heather. Now to see about her own possibilities for a beau.

Chapter Four

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Bea touched the soft wisps of hair at her temple as she made her way down Main Street to the church. Did she look nice? Mr. Yorkshire had never seen Hollie, at least he didn't know who she was to know if he'd seen her, so maybe Bea had a chance. In his proclamation when he first arrived, he said he wanted a wife to tend his hearth and home and give him children. He hadn't said nothing about his future wife being beautiful... or even pretty.

Bea was neither.

But she could make a man happy with a clean house and good meals. She didn't know how many children the good Lord would allow her to bear, but she had always longed for a big family. Growing up alone with her much-older brother and always traveling around the western United States, she longed for a house full of people who were related to her. All she had to do was let Mr. Yorkshire know she was a match for what he deemed his ideal wife. God forgive her, Hollie was not.

Considering Hollie had run off with some other gal's feller, to Bea's way of thinking, she had eliminated herself from the race. Certainly, Bea would have been eliminated by her brother for much less frivolous behavior, if she'd been allowed to run the race at all. This could be her chance to slip in at the half-way point and run with the others, even crossing the finish line before her brother realized what happened.

She neared the church, breathing as normal as she could despite her increasingly pounding heart. It was thrilling to think she might soon have a beau to change her dismal life and make her the center of attention at last, rather than a burden. A smile stretched across her mouth. She rather liked how it felt.

She entered the sanctuary. Empty. Silence slammed into her with an eery sensation. Where was Heather? Where was Mr. Yorkshire? She

looked all around, but no one could be found. Not even Barnaby, who had closed himself in his office earlier. It, too, was empty now.

This church had not been completely vacant for weeks. It was disconcerting. Had Hollie come back and taken Mr. Yorkshire after all? Disappointment overran her heart like the banks of the North Platte River after the storm. A tear shoved its way onto her cheek. She swiped it away quickly and hurried onto the landing where so many brides and grooms had paused for rice and flowers to be thrown at them for good luck.

Something caught her eyes in the churchyard. Her brother enthusiastically shook hands with a man in an oversized dirt-covered duster that hung down to the ground. A wide-brimmed hat covered his eyes, but his pimpled complexion made him look young, very young.

Or maybe he wasn't rugged like the cowboys who had been filling the church with a masculine musk that Bea had grown to like a lot. His horse, in contrast to him, looked old and sway backed. She was a mare. Her feet needed attention and she was in need of a good grooming. If this was any indication of how well the stranger took care of his loved ones, Bea didn't want to have any part in getting to know him beyond hello and goodbye.

Mr. Yorkshire had said he was here to serve as the town's farrier. Maybe he could clean this mare up a bit, but this stranger needed a new horse if he wished to continue traveling. The thought of Mr. Yorkshire settling in as a farrier made her sigh. She could only wish it to be so.

Bea slowly, cautiously, walked away from the church entrance to approach Barnaby and his friend. Her gut tightened with an anxious thought: Was he the Godly man Barnaby kept telling her would be divinely chosen to be her husband?

Something about this road warrior alarmed her greatly. Was he a traveling pastor? Was her brother seriously expecting her to go back to a nomadic life? Why couldn't he understand she wanted to stay put here in Last Chance.

Both horse and rider looked weary and grateful to be stopping in

a town where their personal needs could be met fully. Was she to be the fulfillment of one of those personal needs? Did Barnaby expect her to marry this scarecrow of a man?

A shudder rifled down her spine. What had Barnaby told him about her? Could it be that he wished to settle down? She couldn't imagine her brother allowing a second man-of-God into his small kingdom. Even if it were his brother-in-law. Barnaby didn't share well with others.

"Let this be a visitor to the pulpit, nothing more," She begged God as she walked closer.

The stranger glanced her way, and then turned full on to face her. Barnaby smiled. She didn't like this smile on her brother's face.

"Ah! And here she is." Barnaby announced. "Darling, Beatrice, this is Pastor Holden Fabler."

She didn't, for the life of her, know why, but she curtsied, awkwardly. \

"Pastor Fabler." She said flatly.

He reached out to her as if they were long-lost friends and he had missed her so much it hurt, taking both her hands into his gloved ones. "Beatrice. You're even more... genteel than Pastor Collins described you to be."

"Really?" She darted a glare toward her brother. "And when was this... that Barnaby told you anything about me?"

"Oh, we've been corresponding as best we could with my moving around in search of lost souls."

"Have you, really?" She glared even harder at Barnaby. "Gee, he never mentioned—"

"Now, now, Bea. Let's not stop Pastor Fabler from settling in and getting some rest. Perhaps you could rustle up some lunch for him. He's staying in our house after all."

She gasped. "He is? Where?" She swallowed. "I mean, our house is small, we only have two bedrooms. Wherever shall we put Pastor Fabler so he can be comfortable?"

The stranger yanked his hat from his oily head. Bea nearly gasped. What she thought was a young boy with pimples, was a full-

grown man with pox scares, or pock marks from a horrible case of a young man's pimples. Either way, it made his face look disfigured and... dare she say, ugly. He stammered, "Well, we—"

"Now, don't you worry your pretty little head about the arrangements. Holden and I have it all worked out."

Bea studied her brother's eyes. There was a fib in there somewhere, she just couldn't figure out where. "Worked out... how, exactly?"

Barnaby slapped the rail-thin man on the back, causing him to stumble forward. "Not to worry, little one. Let's get this man fed and his horse tended to, then we can sit down together and discuss everything."

Pastor Fabler licked his lips as he ran his gaze over Bea's stature, from the top of her hat to the hem of her skirt. She felt like a rabbit in a snare and this hungry wolf was about to pounce.

"You'll be coming home, then?" She gawked at her brother, wishing he would acknowledge the offensive looks she was seeing and tell the man this was a mistake.

"Of course, I will. The flock doesn't need me right now, and if it does, Mrs. Barnes will send someone to fetch me."

Bea gulped. "But—"

He gestured for her to walk ahead of him. His smile was bigger than she'd ever seen on his face. It filled her gut with trepidation. Did her brother honestly realize what he was suggesting for her? This man looked scrawny, like a boy, and boys were generally full of lust and want, not love and devotion. What could this man want from her other than carnal pleasures? He'd said she looked *genteel*— what did that mean?

She had to make Barnaby understand he had chosen poorly. Be he ordained or not, this scarred and tattered Pastor Holden Fabler was not the right man for her to marry.

[OBJ]



Bea rushed to cross the street toward their home, ahead of her brother and his guest, fearful of what Barnaby had in mind. Before,

when traveling preachers came into town, Barnaby paid for them to have a room at the hotel. Well, the church paid for it. Barnaby used the Widows and Orphans funds to put visitors up for one night and sent them on their way after services and a meal. The Widows and Orphans funds were depleted since the September storms. It had been used to bury and rebuild where needed.

This man was the first traveling preacher to come through Last Chance since summer. Apparently, Barnaby had been corresponding with him. For how long, she wondered?

How long had Barnaby been planning to marry her off to a traveling preacher? Was this the reason he wouldn't allow her to participate in the husband hunt? Why hadn't her brother spoken to her about any of this?

And what was she going to fix for lunch? She and Barnaby had been enjoying Hollie's sandwiches and tea at the church for weeks. Bea had only been preparing supper for her and Barnaby of an evening. Could she get away with a cold lunch? Or did he expect her to cook a full three-course meal now that they had a *guest* with them? She stopped abruptly. *Just where did Barnaby expect this stranger to sleep?*

She turned to glare at her brother and his friend in tow. "How long have you been planning this?" she asked.

Barnaby's smile faltered. "Beatrice, honey, I told you Gawd has made all the plans for you. Plans for a good life. Holden and I are just following what the good Lord has laid out before us."

Bea's eyes darted between the two men. "Of course, but why didn't you mention—"

"Let's have a meal and discuss it in full after our friend has had a chance to freshen up, Beatrice." His voice started out kind but ended in a growl. He didn't want her opposing him in front of Pastor Fabler. Fine! But she would have it out with her brother. This man could not possibly be the one God had chosen for her. He wasn't handsome, or strong, or tall, or any of the things a woman dreamed of for a husband. He had lechery in his eyes, nothing more. Why couldn't Barnaby see it as clearly as she could?

“Your friend, not mine.” Bea muttered to herself as she crossed Church Street to their parsonage on the corner. “And if you think for one minute that I’m going to go along with this hair-brained scheme of yours—”

“Beatrice!” Sam Yorkshire stood before her in front of her house. She had nearly walked right into him. He held her more firmly to steady her. “Mrs. Barnes told me I should find you after I got settled into a room.” He looked her over, as if he were looking for an injury. “Are you alright?”

She glanced over her shoulder at her brother and the unwanted guest. “Yes. I’m fine.”

Yorkshire chuckled. “You... were talking to yourself, I believe.”

“Well, I—” She glanced back at Barnaby. His jovial smile faded to a frown. Fabler mirrored her brother’s concern. Barnaby didn’t want her talking to Mr. Yorkshire. She knew it before she confirmed his expression. She blinked. “Wh-what did you need, Mr. Yorkshire?”

He shoved his fingers into his dark curls and stared at the toe of his boots. “Well, I-it seems I was asked here by the wrong woman, but I’m not mad.” He shook his head and lifted his gaze to meet hers.

A thrill race down her spine. His dark eyelashes and deep-brown orbs muddled her brain. God help her, she liked the feeling.

“Mrs. Barnes explained to me how you women were coerced into sending for husbands before you’d had a proper chance to mourn your dead.”

Barnaby caught up with Beatrice and practically stepped in-between her and Mr. Yorkshire, forcing the cowboy to step back from her. “What’s this?”

Beatrice closed her eyes in mortified embarrassment. “Barnaby, don’t be rude!”

Her brother snapped a glare toward her. She had never corrected his manners in her life.

“Well, now. I don’t think it rude to ask a... gentleman why he’s *handling* my... sister, when she’s betrothed to another.”

Beatrice cringed.

Mr. Yorkshire stepped back. “I beg pardon! I didn’t realize. I—”

“I’m not— he’s not—” Bea swallowed hard, doing her best to regain her composure. “Mr. Yorkshire, I assure you, I am not anybody’s betrothed. Not yet anyway.” She turned a fiery glare to her brother and his cohort.

“Well, in that case.” Mr. Yorkshire seemed to breathe in a lungful of confidence. Perhaps he sensed a challenge and it strengthened him. Bea watched his composure change as he stood a little taller. “I came to ask you if you would join me at the diner for some conversation.”

“Conversation?” Heat shot up to Bea’s cheeks. She didn’t need rouge now. “What, exactly did Mrs. Barnes tell you?”

Barnaby pulled Pastor Fabler into the mix. “But Beatrice, we have a guest, and you were going to fix lunch for us.”

Bea turned her gaze to her brother. “He’s not *my* guest. *You* fix him lunch. I have an invitation from Mr. Yorkshire.” She took Mr. Yorkshire’s arms and smiled up into his handsome face. Mr. Yorkshire jerked a nod and turned with her on his arm to walk back toward the diner.

“Now, see here!” Barnaby yelled.

“Never mind him.” Bea giggled. “He thinks he’s my father.”

Chapter Five

[OB]



“Now, looky here, Pastor Collins.” Holden gripped his cup of coffee that Pastor Collins had poured him like it was a lifeline in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. “I never intended to come this far south! But you promised me—”

“I know what I promised you, Holden!” Barnaby snapped. He crammed a butcher knife through a slab of ham, slamming the blade into the cutting block, then wriggled it free of the wood. “My error, I suppose, was not forewarning Beatrice that you were coming.”

Holden squinted his eye. “I thought you said your sister was shy and demure... you said she was completely in agreement with this marriage plan.”

“She was. She is!” He sliced another piece of ham. “I mean, she wants a husband. I want her to be married... and happy. We’ve discussed that Gawdah has a *good man* for her. I just didn’t tell her I already knew who that man was.” He buttered two slices of bread and put the ham between them, placed the sandwich on a plate, and handed it to Holden.

Holden shoved a corner of the food into his mouth, taking an enormous bite, breathing through his nose heavily, he chewed quickly and swallowed hard.

Barnaby paused. “Uh, Holden. Don’t you wanna say grace?”

Holden gulped the coffee and cleared his throat. “Oh, sure, of course.”

He bowed his head for a second and blurted, “Amen.” Then the remainder of the sandwich went into his mouth along with the rest of his coffee. He chewed laboriously and swallowed painfully.

“Co—” Holden swallowed harder as if he were about to choke. “Could I have another?”

Barnaby gawked at his gluttony with a gaping mouth. “Uh, sure. When was the last time you ate, son?”

“I killed a rabbit last night.” His eyes widened as he watched Barnaby slather butter on two more slices of bread. “Cooked it over a spit fire.”

“A whole rabbit, huh?”

“Sure.” Holden swallowed as if there were too much saliva in his mouth while Barnaby slid the plate to him. The man gulped down the second sandwich in the same fashion, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Rabbits and squirrels, fish, occasionally a bird or two. Depends on what the good Lord provides. Like Elijah, God always provides when a man is in the wilderness.” Holden smiled. Bread and a sliver of ham showed between his teeth.

Barnaby swallowed, hard. Angst knotted in his gut. “Yea, I remember being on the trail to save souls. Don’t folks feed you while you’re among them, and give you dried meat or anything to take along with you when you leave a community?”

“Oh, sure. But it don’t last me no time at all. I may look like a skin-n-bones sort of a man, Pastor Collins, but I got a giant’s size appetite.”

“Do you, now?” Barnaby made his own sandwich and slowly sat with his guest. “Tell me, just how big an appetite do you have?” He smiled anxiously.

Holden tilted his head and stared at Barnaby. “I’m not sure what you’re asking me.”

“Well.” Barnaby meticulously wiped his fingers with a linen napkin, something Holden had overlooked while cleaning his mouth with his hand. “I love my sister very much, you see. I only want her to be happy. I suppose I’m asking you just how much are you gonna expect out of her, once you are married and all. She’s such a blessing in the church, plays the piano like an angel. She’s good with the people, an excellent cook, housekeeper, companion. I wouldn’t want your gluttonous desires to overwhelm her right from the start.”

Holden cocked his head back on his shoulders. “Gluttonous desires... you calling me a glutton?”

“Well,” Barnaby focused his glare on the man. “If the way you ate those sandwiches is any indication of how you live your life, I

have to wonder what kind of a husband you're gonna be for Beatrice."

Holden searched the table, found the linen napkin folded in the center of the table, and lifted it to gently wipe his mouth. "I think you have misinterpreted my hunger for a homemade meal with un-Godly hunger of the flesh."

"Oh, I do beg your pardon." Barnaby spoke smooth as silk. "I didn't mean to offend, my friend. I just wanted to be sure I haven't made a mistake choosing you for my sister. We are simple people, living simple lives. I realize her lack of a dowry could deter a good man from realizing what a blessing she would be to his life."

He stood, took a quick step to Holden, grabbed his lapel and lifted him from his chair. "I just don't want you to misunderstand what a treasure my sister is for a deserving man." He pressed his nose against Holden's and gritted his teeth. "You are a *deserving man*, aren't you, Pastor Fabler?"

Holden trembled in Barnaby's grasp. "Uh, I-sure, sure. I-I'm a Godly man and I'm deserving of a good woman, like your sister, uh, Beatrice. She's right pretty, too. I feel my love growing for her already!"

"Make sure that's all that's growing for my Beatrice, Fabler, or I'll make sure nothing works right when you need it most, ever again." He shoved Holden down into his chair and straightened his cuffs. "Now, I promised you an opportunity to freshen up, but my sister isn't here to warm you a bath, so I'll show you to my bedroom. You can rest on my bed while I fetch the wash tub and boil you some water. Even a humble pastor like myself can boil water." Barnaby chuckled.

"Much obliged." Holden stammered.

"My room is this way." Barnaby gestured upstairs, toward the short hall where his room mirrored Beatrice's room. "My room's on the right. Don't you forget, stay right, don't turn to the left, or you'll regret it."

"Yes sir." Holden clasped his hat to his chest. "I-I won't, Pastor. I-I promise." He scrambled to his feet and scurried to the designated room.

Barnaby watched him go. He turned to the window and glared

down the street as if he might be able to see the diner from here. What was Beatrice thinking? Having lunch with a stranger at the diner? He needed to talk to her. Talk some sense into her. Why was she being so outspoken today? That Heather Barnes must be filling her head with nonsense. Maybe he should have a word with the midwife before he tracked down Beatrice. She had interfered with his household one time too many.

But first, he needed to fetch water and put it on to boil before he brought in the wash tub. Could Holden Fabler truly wash the filth from his body? He'd better, or else this arrangement would be null and void. No heathen, be he ordained or otherwise, was going to marry his Beatrice and lead her into a life of misery.

[OBI]



Sam Yorkshire looked up from the tabletop. His eyes were dark like the open Nebraskan plains on a moonless night. "I hope you don't mind that I'm not upset about Hollie Dawson not showing up at the church to meet me." He said quietly. His confidence seemed to be waning.

Beatrice smiled. "To be honest, I understand— I think. Knowing what you said you were wanting in a wife and knowing Hollie, I have to admit you done right to open your mind to other possibilities."

"You do?" His eyes filled with relief.

Jenny approached their table. "Morning, Miss Collins. What can I get ya?"

Bea looked to Mr. Yorkshire for an answer. He smiled at Jenny politely. "I'll take a cup of coffee, and whatever Miss Collins wants. Uh, is the breakfast menu still available?"

Jenny nodded then turned to Bea.

"I'll have coffee, too." She turned back to Mr. Yorkshire.

"Breakfast is available all day here. It's Hollie's specialty."

"Oh. This is the diner you mentioned that Mrs. Dawson owns." He looked all around. "Where is she?"

Jenny fidgeted from one foot to the other. "She, uh..."

Bea pressed a smile. "She's not here." Glancing at Jenny, Bea

knew that Jenny knew the truth but wasn't saying. "I believe she's running errands right now."

"Oh." Yorkshire nodded. "Well, in that case, could I have a stack of flapjacks and a heap of bacon?"

Bea giggled. "I'll have the same."

Jenny shot her a questioning wrinkled brow.

"Only..." Bea clarified. "Make mine two pancakes and two slices of bacon."

Jenny nodded as she wrote the order on her pad. "A Hungry Cowboy and a Lady's stack, coming right up." She walked to the window where Tuck's bandana and wiry black hair could be seen bobbing around as he cooked and gave him the order. He flashed a quick smile at Bea and went back to work.

She lowered her eyes to Mr. Yorkshire who shrugged. "Been quite a trip to get here, I reckon I'm a might bit hungry."

"That's alright. This is the place to fill up." Beatrice smiled graciously. "So, tell me, where are you from?"

Yorkshire grinned. "I been working as an apprentice to my uncle back east."

"Is that how you learned the farrier trade?"

"Yes." Yorkshire sat back to allow Jenny to place the two coffees on the table. "My Uncle raised me, to be honest with ya. My folks died in a fire and I was the only one who survived on account of my ma threw me out the window and my uncle caught me." He laughed. "I don't 'member none of it, but my uncle told me about his brother, my pa, and how good they were."

"My goodness. What an amazing start in life."

"Yeah, I reckon." He sipped his coffee and let his eyes fall to the tabletop.

Bea smiled sweetly. "My brother would say God had a purpose for you."

Yorkshire's eyes darted to hers. "Your brother? Is he Pastor Collins?"

Bea nodded.

"Oh gosh! I said some awful things about him when you were on

the street. Was that him behind you? Oh, ma'am, I'm so sorry. I had no right to say them things about your brother."

Bea held out her hand to stop him. "It's alright. You didn't say anything that wasn't true. He has forced the townswomen into moving forward long before they were ready."

"Well, I had no right." He swallowed hard. "I'm from Delaware. A little community known as Dover. We lived out along the Saint Jones River on a farm. My ma and pa lived on one side of the river and Uncle Jake lived on the other. That's how he knew their house was on fire. He saw the smoke." He paused a moment, then continued. "I saw the ad inside the paper and Uncle Jake suggested I come out west for the adventure of my life. He said, 'You ought to answer that ad, Sam. Last Chance, Nebraska sounds like an adventure of a lifetime.'"

Yorkshire smiled at the memory. "Hollie Dawson answered my letter, and Uncle Jake gave me my inheritance, and here I am." His smile grew wider. "I figure I'll start my own business and marry me a good woman, and—"

His gaze focused on her. "You say you're available for marriage? That feller with your brother isn't betrothed to you or nothing?"

"I—"

Jenny set two plates between them, halting Beatrice's reply. Mr. Yorkshire's stack of pancakes wobbled and a slice of bacon fell from the pile onto the table. Mr. Yorkshire picked it up quickly and stuffed it in his mouth.

"Is there anything else I can get you?" Jenny giggled.

"No, Jenny. I think we have what we need." Bea smiled at the girl, amused by her companion's appetite, also.

"Alright. Enjoy your food." Jenny turned to fill another table's coffees.

Bea looked at Mr. Yorkshire, folded her hands and bowed her head. She heard him swallow the bacon he had rescued from the table and then silence fell between them. Bea grinned. "Lord, thank you for always knowing what is best for us. Bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies and our bodies to thy service. Amen."

She lifted her eyes.

“Amen.” Mr. Yorkshire said before grabbing the jar of syrup and letting the dark brown liquid cascade over his stack of pancakes. Bea watched him twist the jar to stop the flow of syrup and hand it to her. She nodded her appreciation and added some syrup to her short stack.

They ate in silence, glancing at one another between bites. She wondered, not for the first time, if Sam Yorkshire had been really sent to her to be her husband, not Hollie Dawson’s.

Bea’s honed instincts, like when she sensed a snake was in the henhouse and she got her rake before reaching in to gather the eggs, said yes. That level of instinct drew her to continue to get to know Mr. Yorkshire. If he wasn’t meant to be her beau, she felt confident there’d be an instinctual sensation to run away, like the way she felt around her brother’s new friend, Pastor Fabler.

Chapter Six

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“May I?” Mr. Yorkshire stated gallantly, extending his elbow to escort Bea home.

Bea giggled. “You may.” Heat filled her cheeks, but joy swamped her heart. At this rate, she’d never need to apply rouge again. This man wasn’t nearly as aggressively harsh as he had tried to come across when he proclaimed his old-fashioned standards for a wife. She’d seen what he had put down for their tab with a generous extra bit for Jenny.

If Hollie had given him a chance, she might have been very happy with him. Then again, Bea quickly corrected her thoughts, it was working out perfectly for her. She hoped the man Hollie ran off with would end up being the right choice after all for Hollie. Seemed those sisters managed to figure out the other two mis-matched grooms and were quite happy.

“Mr. Yorkshire?” Bea dared query.

He lifted his eyes to meet hers and smiled. “Yes.”

His smile took her breath. She had to refocus on what she’d intended to say. Swallowing hard, she continued. “May I be so bold as to ask... if you are pleased with the way things have worked out... the way they have? I mean—”

“I know what you mean.” He patted her hand at his elbow. “I never really knew Hollie Dawson. She only wrote one letter and that was to invite me here. We didn’t exchange correspondence or ideas or information. I don’t even know what she looks like.”

Bea pursed a smile. “She’s a lovely woman, really. Like so many here in Last Chance, she loved her husband dearly. He was a wagon maker, owned a shop right... over there.” She pointed down Fourth Street as they walked by where the sign read Dawson Wagon Shop. It still sat locked and lonely.

Sam eyed the many warehouse businesses that looked unopened.

“I suppose since she had the diner, she couldn’t possibly try to run both businesses. I heard some women were doing their best to keep their late husband’s businesses going.”

Bea nodded. An unshed tear choked her words. “It’s been very difficult to recover from the devastating losses.”

They walked another block in silence. Finally, Mr. Yorkshire asked, “So, does Last Chance still have a blacksmith or livery owner?”

“Livery, yes. Dave McFarland was asked to stay home when the men went on the hunt. He survived the storms, and it was a good thing, because he has been a big help to many of the widows, including Hollie’s sister, Becca. She brought what was left of her livestock to town, moved into his house, and he moved into his tack room.

“Her ranch house is two miles out. She led several horses and a few mules right after the storms let up. I heard tell she nearly froze to death, but like so many, God protected her, and she made it here. She and Mr. McFarland were, well, they’ve been friends since childhood. That’s why he took her in. They aren’t a couple or nothing like that.”

“I see.” Mr. Yorkshire stared at the walk. “I’m so sorry for everyone’s loss. Who did you lose?”

Bea popped her head up and gawked at him. No one had asked her that! No one even considered if she had lost anyone besides friends and acquaintances. “There was a gentleman I was fond of, but we had not made any serious plans. Barnaby kept telling me God had the right feller in mind, but I don’t know.” She sighed. “Still, it is sad to think what might have been.”

Mr. Yorkshire nodded. “I understand.”

They walked in silence down the remainder of Main Street. Did he really understand? Obviously, he had not made a commitment to anyone back east. Had he been as unlucky in love as she had been?

With her house at one end, before the church lot, and the diner at the other, it was a long leisurely walk. Bea couldn’t help but to smile to herself. The more time she spent with Mr. Yorkshire, the more she liked him.

He had a long stride, but he shortened his steps to accommodate

her shorter gait. He left his free hand lying over hers at his elbow, making their walk more affectionate rather than a gentlemanly duty. Her heart pounded increasingly as they approached her house. She couldn't find any reason to think this wouldn't work out between her and Mr. Yorkshire.

"Beatrice Abigail Collins!" Her brother screeched from the porch. She had not noticed him or Pastor Fabler sitting there until her brother rose and bellowed her full Christian name like a child who had missed her curfew.

Maybe there was *one* reason Mr. Yorkshire wouldn't want to pursue a relationship with Bea: Her brother's insistence that it was God's will she marry this traveling pastor.

He was not who Bea wanted, but her brother had a way of getting what he wanted regardless of what anybody else desired. Like this premature hunt for husbands. None of the widows were ready for this, and yet here they were, accepting betrothals and standing at the altar to marry even though their hearts were still laden with grief.

Would Mr. Yorkshire prefer to marry a woman less complicated, less dominated by a brother who passionately controlled the town? Would Mr. Yorkshire put up a fight for Bea when he hardly knew her?

Not that Pastor Fabler would be a worthy opponent. He didn't look like he could fight his way out of a burlap bag, let alone confront this six-foot something, rugged cowboy who shoed horses and slung an anvil around like it was nothing.

The thought made her giggle.

"What you think's so funny, Missy?" Barnaby scowled.

Her eyes darted up to her brother standing with hands on hips and frowning like he'd eaten a sour lemon. She swallowed. "Nothing. I —"

"Well." Mr. Yorkshire patted her hand and turned to gaze into her eyes. "I can see you need to spend some time with your family. May I call on you for supper?" He lifted his cowboy hat slightly and set it back precisely on his dark hair.

"Of course." Bea smiled. "Say, seven?"

"Seven sounds perfect." Mr. Yorkshire returned her smile. He

turned with a serious face toward Barnaby leaving her in a daze, bedazzled by his smile.

“Pastor Collins.” Yorkshire lifted his hat again. “Uh, Pastor...”

“Fabler.” Bea offered. “Holden Fabler.”

“Fabler.” Yorkshire continued with another lift of his cowboy hat, and turned to walk back down Main Street. Bea assumed he was returning to his room at Mrs. Martin’s hotel on First and Main, behind the diner. She had forgotten to ask where he had secured a room. There were boarding houses, too. Maybe she’d ask him this evening when he took her to supper.

She could feel Barnaby glowering at her. Oh, yeah, supper. They had a guest in their home. “Uh, Mr. Yorkshire. Why don’t you plan to have supper at our house?” She glanced at her brother and his friend. “We have company, after all, and I shouldn’t neglect their needs for supper. You might as well join the three of us.”

Mr. Yorkshire’s mouth curled into a mischievous smile. Did he know what she was saying without her saying it? Taking hold of the brim of his hat, he tipped his head forward. “I’d be honored, ma’am.”

Bea grinned. A thrill of excitement shot up into her heart. He had accepted the challenge of supping with her brother and this intruder he’d brought into her life, knowing the controversy his presence presented. She reached into her reticule and pulled out a handkerchief with embroidered lavender blossoms. She shook it out flat, folded it into a triangle, and flipped it into a roll. Tiptoeing to reach his neck, she tied it around Mr. Yorkshire’s neck above his collar and patted the square knot at his Adam’s apple. “See you at seven, all the same.”

The cords in his neck pulsed. “Seven, it is.”

He touched the kerchief at his neck with a smile, tipped his hat once more, and turned to walk away.

She swirled back and floated onto the porch, past her brother and Fabler, and entered their house. She had a lot of work ahead of her. She wanted this supper to be an excellent representation of what she could do in the kitchen. What Mr. Yorkshire would be gaining, and what Mr. Fabler would be missing out on.

Yorkshire had also accepted to wear her hanky. He acknowledged she had chosen him. She couldn't be happier.

"What was that all about!" Her brother popped her bubble of joy, storming in behind her.

She turned on him with honey in her voice. "Whatever do you mean?"

Pastor Fabler followed Barnaby into the house like he lived there, and watched their interaction. His eyes sparked with greedy enthusiasm for a fight. She'd seen that same look on boys in the school yard, egging other boys into a fist fight. Bea glanced at Mr. Fabler then returned her gaze to her brother. She waited for him to explain.

"You. Acting like that? What were you thinking? I told you Pastor Fabler is who Gawdah has chosen for you to marry. How could you go off with that riffraff cowboy like you didn't even know?"

Bea bit the inside of her cheek to keep her temper intact. She had not been raised to speak against her brother, especially in front of other people, but his time of controlling her life had to come to an end. If this weaselly little man was Barnaby's choice for her, he had chosen wrong. For him to insist this was God's choice was just plain blasphemy, and she was not going to accept it as truth. She knew in her heart her brother was using his position as an ordained pastor to manipulate her life.

"My dear brother." Bea began slowly. "I have supper for four to prepare. You and Pastor Fabler should take a tour of Last Chance or go to the church to see if anyone needs your council. I have work to do." She smiled sweetly and turned to Holden. "I'm not sure what my brother promised you, Mr. Fabler. But I am not your prize for showing up here. You see, I already have a beau, and am not available for your affections. There are other single women here, thanks to a devastating storm that took nearly every available man in town away from us. Perhaps my brother can introduce you to one of them who is closer to your caliber and age."

She turned with a swoosh of her skirts and marched to the kitchen, ignoring every word that rolled out of Barnaby's mouth. Her ears were no longer tuned to his voice. She hummed as she put on her

apron. Heather Barnes had stated many times, “The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” Bea agreed that was good advice.

“I think I’ll start with an apple pie.”

[OB!]



“Perhaps I ought ta head on out to Scottsbluff.” Holden Fabler wrung his hat in his hands. “I hear there’s some lost souls needing a good brimstone-and-hell-fire sermon.” He chuckled nervously.

“Nonsense!” Barnaby slapped him on his back.

Fabler stumbled forward, clumsily regaining his balance.

Barnaby grabbed his shoulder to help steady the man. “You’re welcome here, no matter what my sister says about the matter. I’m the one responsible for her well-being, and I say she needs a Gawdly man like yourself. These bronze Adonises might turn her eye, but they’re no good in the long run of life. She needs a stable, trustworthy, man who’ll keep her focused on her Gawdly duties as a wife, and not cause her scandalous, wanton desires beyond what a lady like herself ought to know.” Barnaby inhaled the aromas coming from the kitchen. “Smell that, Holden? That’s your future! My sister is a master in the kitchen. She keeps a clean house and tends to her darning of an evening. No idle hands in this house, I assure you. She’s gonna make you an excellent wife. Trust me.”

“Well, that’s what you say, but what about that cowboy she had lunch with today. He-he obviously has taken a shine to Miss Beatrice, too. And she gave him her hanky, like-like she was giving him her colors to wear for a knight’s competition. How am I gonna compete against a feller like that?”

“Now, you just let me handle Beatrice. Keep in mind, this supper is just an example of what is to be part of your life, not that cowboy’s. All we gotta do is make *him* realize Beatrice belongs to *you*. That hanky she gave him today doesn’t mean a thing. She’s promised to you and my word is as good as gold, my friend.” He slapped Holden again, causing him to stumble another two steps and cough.

Holden blinked, cleared his throat, then smiled uncertainly at Barnaby. “If-if you say so, Pastor Collins. If you say so.”

A knock came to the front door. Bea stuck her head out of the kitchen door as she yanked her apron from around her. "I'll get that."

She scurried to the door, swooshed past Barnaby and Holden, and paused in front of the wooden obstruction. She took a deep breath and opened the door in an elegant sweeping motion. "Hello."

"Evening." The cowboy's husky voice filled the foyer.

Bea shoved the door aside as the cowboy stepped over the threshold. His duster hung over his polished boots which reflected the illumination from the lanterns lit in the foyer. Bea gestured toward the parlor where Barnaby and Holden stood gawking at the newcomer. "Please come in and sit a moment. Supper will be ready soon. May I take your hat and coat?"

"Yes. Thank you." He glanced at Barnaby, then Holden. "Thank you for having me in your home for supper, Pastor Collins."

He had changed clothes, although he still wore Bea's hanky around his neck, and had combed his hair back from his forehead. He wore a clean and pressed shirt and dark denim britches. He was clean shaven, too. He held his cowboy hat in his hands. There was a clean odor wafting from him, like a barber shop. Had he gotten a haircut and put on cologne?

Barnaby frowned. "I wasn't the one who invited you."

"Barnaby!" Bea glared at him. "He's *my* guest, and *you* will treat him accordingly."

The cowboy didn't seem to be bothered by Barnaby's rude reply. In fact, he looked amused by it. Barnaby had quite the challenge on his hands. This Holden Fabler was a scared little rabbit, compared to Yorkshire. Barnaby's work was cut out for him convincing Beatrice that Holden was the better choice for her to marry. Even Barnaby had to admit Yorkshire made the stronger candidate, even though he knew nothing about the man, other than he'd come here to marry Hollie Dawson and ended up courting his sister.

But how good would Yorkshire be to Beatrice? Would he cheat on her? Cowboys were known for their carnal lust. Barnaby gritted his teeth. Leave her with several children needing refuge back home with him? His eyes darted to Pastor Fabler.

Then again, this traveling preacher had come into town at just the right time, but would he make Beatrice happy? Surely as an ordained preacher, he'd be honorable and trustworthy with her heart. Wouldn't he? Barnaby needed to know more about both of these men before he confirmed which side he was supporting. "Let's all go into the dining room, shall we. I'm sure Bea is ready to serve supper."

Chapter Seven

108



Bea glared at her brother. He didn't know if she had supper completely ready or not. Why was he insisting they all go sit at the table? Truth was, she was letting her cat-head dinner rolls brown a little more before she took them out of the oven. Which allowed her a chance to sit down and visit before serving the meal.

"Uh, of course. I'll just go check on the rolls." So much for sitting a few minutes! She dashed into the kitchen and slid back into her pristine apron.

Opening the oven with the padded pocket on her apron she saw they had lovely golden-brown heads. She was pleased and pulled the tin tray from the oven. Quickly, she lifted the large platter with pork steaks piled on top from the warming area of the oven and took it to the table. Scurrying back into the kitchen, she smiled when she heard the men inhale and sigh. She gathered the bowls of mashed potatoes, and turnips greens with little chunks of turnips and salt pork, along with the gravy boat. It smelled good, too. If this didn't do the trick, nothing would.

Last she transferred the rolls into a tea-towel-lined basket and covered them as she hurried to the table. "There. Butter is at both ends of the table and tea is on the buffet. Please help yourselves after Pastor Collins blesses the meal. She sat and bowed her head, waiting.

Barnaby stumbled over his words but said grace and Amen. Bea looked up to find Mr. Fabler and Mr. Yorkshire reaching for the pitcher of tea. Fabler shoved his elbow into Mr. Yorkshire's. Yorkshire blinked with surprise and lifted a glass instead. Fabler realized his mistake, and lifted a glass, while an ornery grin curled on his mouth. Fabler triumphantly poured his tea and returned to the table. Bea fought the urge to jump up and pour the men's teas, but she remained seated. Mr. Yorkshire turned to Bea. "Miss Collins, may I bring you a glass of tea?"

“Yes, please.” She smiled at her brother. Hoping he realized which of the two suiters had passed the first test. Pastor Fabler frowned. Not so triumphant after all.

Barnaby frowned and pushed back his chair, causing it to rock from front to back. “Oh, for goodness—” He stepped to the buffet and poured himself a tea, as Yorkshire passed him on his way to deliver a glass to her and sat down beside her with his own. Fabler had chosen the seat across from Bea, and Barnaby sat in his usual end chair. He began the procession to take a sampling of food onto his plate and pass the dish to his right, which was to Fabler.

Once their plates were full, Bea put her linen napkin in her lap. The men followed her lead and did the same, except Fabler tucked his into his collar. She lifted her fork and began eating. The visitors did the same. Barnaby watched with gaping mouth. Huffed. Then began to eat as well. “One would think you were the Queen or something.” Barnaby muttered under his breath.

Bea smiled inwardly. This was fun, comparing the two gentlemen’s manners and gluttonous ways. Mr. Yorkshire outshined Fabler by a country mile.

“So...” Bea wiped her mouth delicately. “What brings you to Last Chance, Pastor Fabler?”

Holden, who was busily shoving food into his mouth and swallowing like he hadn’t eaten in several days, glanced up. A leafy turnip green hung on his lip. He scraped it into his mouth with her upper teeth and swallowed hard. “Well, I- you know, your brother asked me to—”

He choked on the food in his mouth and grabbed for his tea glass. Bea glanced at her brother, silently asking if he were going to pat the man’s back or what. Barnaby frowned with his eyebrows and stood to reach over to assist the hacking man. Fabler wheezed and flopped back in his chair. “Oh. Just a minute.” He held up one finger. Cleared his throat again and tried once more. “I came here to marry you.” He croaked.

His eyes darted toward Mr. Yorkshire and back to Barnaby.

“Well,” Bea lowered her napkin to her lap and lifted her

flatware, poised to cut another bite from the pork steak. “What a shame you wasted your time.”

She cut and lifted the morsel to her mouth.

“Now see here!” Barnaby bellowed.

Bea calmly turned to her brother. “What?”

He huffed and snapped his lips together but couldn’t find his words.

Bea turned to Mr. Yorkshire and laid her hand over his. “I believe I have selected my new beau.” She widened her eyes, praying Mr. Yorkshire would openly agree. How foolish would she feel if he did not? This was the whole point of having Mr. Yorkshire here for supper. To show her brother and his friend that she was no longer in the running, but chosen.

Mr. Yorkshire gently wiped his mouth with the linen. “Well, I have one thing to say about that.”

Bea held her breath. This was either it, or she was about to be shamed to death. If Mr. Yorkshire didn’t want her for his wife, she would have no excuse to not marry Pastor Fabler. What a miserable life she would have with him. She knew in her heart he was a coward and, from the looks he gave her, a lustful man. She couldn’t imagine ever being happy with him. Yorkshire on the other hand, caused her heart to leap into a gallop and soar into the air like a winged horse.

Yorkshire turned to face Beatrice. “I think you should call me Sam.”

Beatrice blinked. “S-sam?”

“Yes ma’am. If you’ll have me, Miss Beatrice Abigail Collins, I’d like to court you and” —he turned to Barnaby— “If you’ll give us your blessing, I believe I’ll be coming back for permission to marry her.”

Barnaby tossed down his cutlery and leapt to his feet. “You’ll do no such thing!”

Bea gasped. “Barnaby! How could you?”

Pastor Fabler grinned and crossed his arms over his chest, like he’d won a prize.

Bea wanted to slap that grin right off Fabler’s face. How dare he, too! How dare the two of them contrive this plan to marry her to

someone she couldn't even like, let alone respect... or love. Fabler didn't stir her heart the way Yorkshire— Sam did. Fabler hadn't said anything at all to make her think she *could* like, let alone love him.

Yorkshire— Sam— on the other hand, had shown kindness and concern. He was polite to her and others. Sure, he had been boastful in the church, but she could tell that was feigned confidence. He had shown a very different side of himself since she had been to lunch with him. And even now, he was asking to court her, not ramrod her down the aisle to be married. He was willing to give her a chance to get to know him and he to get to know her.

But in truth, she paused to reflect. She had not given Pastor Fabler a chance. She had judged him by his cover and that was no way to tell if a book was any good. Should she take the time to allow both of them to court her?

She sighed. "I tell you what." Thinking it through, she decided this was the most amicable solution. At least it would show Barnaby that she tried to do it his way. "I'll allow both of you to court me."

Barnaby gasped. She held up her hand to stop him. "Please, Barnaby, let me finish." She turned back to the two men. "If you're willing to give me time to get to know you both, one at a time, and then choose which of you I want to marry. I believe it is the only fair way to make such an important decision."

Yorkshire reached up and untied her hanky from his neck. She swallowed. Did this mean he was not willing to enter a contest between himself and another man? Her heart pounded and she breathed more heavily. Waiting for him to speak was excruciating.

"Alright. Miss Collins. I'll agree to that." Yorkshire smiled sweetly.

Fabler clambered to his feet. His linen napkin still tucked into his collar. "M-me, too." He smiled but it looked more like a grimace. A piece of pork was sticking out from between his teeth. He licked at it and sucked it into his mouth.

Bea's eyebrow rose. Perhaps this wasn't necessary after all. Her heart still favored Yorkshire. "All right, then. Let's finish our meal and we will figure out a schedule for tomorrow."

Sam sat leisurely, confidently, and resumed eating.

Fabler flopped down, finished the few bites he had left. Dragged his roll through the gravy and sucked the ends of his fingers.

Bea watched his ill-mannered eating and sighed. "There's apple pie for dessert."

[OBI]



When the plates were empty, Bea gathered them in a stack and put them in the wash tub for later. She pulled down dessert plates and clean forks. Balancing the plates and cutlery, she lifted the pie in her other hand and returned to the dining room. "Here we go. The perfect ending to a lovely meal. Apple pie."

"I'll say." Pastor Fabler licked his lips, much in the same way he had licked his lips when he first made her acquaintance. A slight shiver trickled down her spine. She sliced and served everyone, including herself, and sat back down. Pastor Fabler put the last piece in his mouth as she cut her first bite with her fork. She sighed.

"Is there coffee?" Fabler looked at the buffet.

"Uh, yes." Bea put down her fork and went to the kitchen for the coffee pot that had been percolating during dinner. She returned and poured everyone, including herself a cup. She sat down and cut another bite of pie.

"Ahh. That was good." Pastor Fabler drained his cup.

Bea gawked at him. Determined to enjoy her pie and not to continue to jump up and tend to Fabler's every need, she took another bite.

"So," Barnaby cut through the tension building between Bea and Pastor Fabler. "What do you plan to do if you stay in Last Chance, Mr., uh..."

He glared at Sam.

"Yorkshire." Sam reminded him. "Samuel Yorkshire. I plan to start a farrier business. I've been an apprentice for several years. I'm ready to be on my own."

"Are you now?" Barnaby replied in a mocking tone. Bea glared at her brother, trying to warn him about his manners.

“Yes sir.” Yorkshire wiped his mouth with his napkin and sipped his coffee. “I’ve been working with my uncle back east—”

“Back east, you say?” Barnaby interrupted.

Bea glared at her brother. “Let the man speak, Barnaby. For Heaven’s sake. You’re so anxious to know more about him, yet you won’t let him tell ya his story.” She smiled at her brother and touched Sam’s arm. “Go ahead, Sam. Tell my brother about your uncle and Dover, Delaware.”

Sam smiled at Bea, then turned his attention to Barnaby. “Well. Like Miss Collins said, I’m from a little place called Dover, Delaware. It’s a farming community and farriers are a dime a dozen, I suppose. My uncle thought it a good idea for me to answer that ad in the Matrimonial Times and come out here to Nebraska to start anew. Hopefully help you folks out and settle down with a wife, start a family, you know, live the American dream.”

Barnaby scoffed. “American dream, eh. You couldn’t live the American dream from one of the first thirteen colonies? Who you running from, Yorkshire? The law? Some daddy’s daughter you scorned?” His brows pressed together like one long caterpillar across his forehead.

“No sir.” Sam kept his gaze steady and confident. “My family’s a God-fearing family, just like your own. We have always respected God and prayed grateful prayers over every meal. I’m not running from any lawman or a vengeful father. I may not be a man of God, but God knows my name and we got an understanding. I do my best to live my life according to the Golden Rule and He watches over me when I could of been in trouble.”

“Ah-ha!” Barnaby pointed his finger in Sam’s face. “So, you admit you tend to get into trouble!”

“Barnaby!” Bea’s face filled with angry heat. How could her brother be so rude!

Sam smiled and shook his head. “We all fall short of perfect, Pastor Collins. I’m just saying I know who to turn to when a situation goes wrong.”

Bea smiled. He’d exceeded her expectations responding to her

brother's inquiry, and she'd learned a little more about him to boot. She turned to Pastor Fabler. "Where are you from, originally, Pastor Fabler?"

His eyes darted to hers. He squinted suspiciously. His pock marks folded over on each other at the outer corners of his eyes. With a quick glance to Barnaby, his eyes softened. "I'm from back east, too... originally. I, uh, left New York State when I was just a boy. A pastor and his wife took me under their wings and taught me the ways of the pulpit and helped me finish my education so I could read and write properly. They helped me get ordained and I been traveling the western territories ever since."

Bea nodded with pursed lips. "I see." She was impressed with Fabler's story. She expected something much more sordid, like what Barnaby was trying to get out of Sam. Fabler pulled up closer to even in her mental test for the champion.

"Well, shall we take our coffee into the parlor?" Bea rose. The men stood. She gathered the dessert plates. Sam reached for the platter and vegetable bowls. Fabler walked away but looked back. He rushed to the table and grabbed the gravy boat and rolls basket, popped a left-over roll in his mouth and spoke around the bread. "Here let me help!"

Bea smiled at them both. At least Fabler was catching on!

Chapter Eight

081



Bea rose, as usual, before Sampson woke her with his screeching that brought back visceral memories of her recurring nightmare, made cookies and muffins, dressed and took the treats to the church for the newly arriving grooms. Only difference was, she dressed nicer, and arranged her hair better. She swiped a light touch of rouge to her cheeks and lips. She had set the ground rules for Holden Fabler and Sam Yorkshire to court her beginning at midday for lunch and evening for supper.

They were allowed to alternate meals and the hour they spent with her. Which left her to fulfill her obligations to Heather Barnes and gave Bea some time to herself for thinking. No longer was she the spinster sister of the town pastor who graciously helped serve tea to the strange gentlemen who seeped into the town looking for their intendeds.

As she walked to the church with baskets on each elbow, she held her chin a little higher. People looked her way, but she saw something different in their eyes. No longer was she looked upon with pity. Word had already spread like wildfire. She had not one, but two suitors. It changed her, knowing she finally had a chance at love and marriage... a family of her own. She liked this new feeling.

Soon, she would be free of her domineering brother and start a life with a loving husband. With no roosters! Well, she probably couldn't get away with not having a rooster. She'd need more chickens and the rooster was a necessary part of that. But perhaps she could locate the hen house far away from her bedroom so the morning alarm of the rooster wouldn't be so prevalent at her window.

"Good morning." Bea cheerfully acknowledged Heather.

She looked frazzled. "Oh, thank God you're here. I've got a mother in labor. Can you take over here?"

"Of course." Bea looked around. There were already two men

waiting. They appeared to have ridden in on horseback and both needed baths. Bea set down her baskets and walked toward the newcomers. "Gentlemen. Why don't I direct you to the bath house and barber, then you can come back for tea and cookies, ready to meet your intendeds." Bea paused. "Who are they anyway? I'll let the women know you are in town and need an hour or two to be ready to make their acquaintance."

The men glared at the muffins with ravenous eyes. Bea glanced along their line of sight. "May I offer you a muffin or two, before you go?"

They nodded and she served them while Heather gathered her belongings and rushed from the church. Bea refilled their mugs with the coffee Heather had made for them and let them eat. Meanwhile she arranged the cookies and additional muffins and put on a kettle of water for tea. When the men had devoured two muffins and three cookies, she took them to the door of the church and gave them directions to the barber.

"You'll want to follow this street all the way down to Stagecoach Road, turn right and a little over halfway down you'll see Butch's Barber Shop. He has baths in the back and can give you a shave and haircut if he's in this early." Bea chuckled. "Which he probably is. He's been doing men's grooming for twenty-five years, and he's a pretty early riser, considering he lives right above the shop."

She smiled as she watched them mount their horses. She thought about Dave McFarland at the livery for the horses' needs, and wondered where Sam might want to put his farrier's shop? Thinking about Sam brought a smile to her mouth and a lighter feeling in her chest.

Her mind immediately flipped to Holden Fabler. She felt nothing. Except a little tired. He was going to take a lot of work to train him in manners and courtesy. She sighed. Holden said he left New York at a young age and was taken in by a pastor and his wife. Had he been orphaned? She wanted to ask. This information could be important in her decision about him. Perhaps there was a reasonable explanation why he was so ill-mannered. Maybe no one ever taught

him the ways of a civilized gentleman.

Bea turned from her rumination at the church entrance and went about dusting and cleaning, preparing for more to enter. She was having lunch with Sam, and she would fix supper with Mr. Fabler. That meant Pastor Fabler would get the evening to sit on her porch and visit. She had questions and that would be the best time to ask them. Barnaby might even give her some privacy, but even if he didn't, there was nothing wrong with asking her suitor about his past. Maybe Barnaby needed to hear more about this man he thought was so perfect for her to marry.

Tomorrow it would be reversed. Pastor Fabler would take her to lunch and Sam would come for supper. Her heart sped up thinking about Sam Yorkshire. His stature and girth presented such masculinity. As a woman, Bea felt safe beside him. She longed to be held in his arms and she could imagine sons and daughters that had his eyes, his chin. She smiled to herself. Pastor Fabler just did not stir the same feelings in her heart. It did occur to her he might have been handsome before whatever caused all the scars on his face.

Still, she promised to herself that she'd give each of them a chance. Once she got to know them better, she might have a different perspective about their potential for marriage and security. She owed herself this time to learn more about these two candidates for her hand.

She rose onto her tiptoes and turned like a ballerina in place, to look around the church, to see that all was clean and in order. The kettle whistled. She rushed to it and moved it to the back where it would stay warm, but not continue to scream.

She made a pot of tea, just for herself and sat down to wait. With a deep inhale and a slow exhale, she pondered what her life would be next year at this time. Would Heather Barnes be coming to her aid as she birthed her first child?

"Ma'am!" A rough voice yanked Bea out of her thoughts.

"Oh, yes. How can I help you?" Bea leapt to her feet. Another groom had arrived in town.



Barnaby and Holden entered the church while Bea was busy serving tea and didn't act like she noticed them. Pastor Fabler noticed her. Barnaby grabbed his arm, yanking him out of his thoughts, and directed him to the office. He'd prefer to stand where he was and watch the sweet little sister of Pastor Collins. She wasn't the prettiest gal he'd ever seen, but she certainly would do for gazing at the rest of his life.

She was soft-spoken, timid and, Collins had made sure she knew her place. She wouldn't be aggressive, seditious, and snooty like so many women he had met along his route as a traveling pastor. This town was all right, too. It was just big enough to meet a man's creature needs, yet small enough to give him leverage over the townsfolk. He liked the whole idea of settling here. All he had to do was figure out how to get Beatrice Collins to marry him.

There would come a day that the current spiritual leader might have reason to step down. Holden would be ready and available to step in and take over as pastor. Everything would be grand for Holden Fabler. Yes, all he had to do was be patient and bide his time.

He allowed Collins to pull him into his office and sat across from the man as if he were a visitor. He bowed his head, pretending to pray, but in truth, he was running through his mind the gardens he had seen when he rode into town. One thing his mother had taught him before they made him an orphan, was which plants could heal and which plants could harm. There were several interesting gardens along the path in which he had walked today.

She was a healer, but they labeled her a witch. He'd never forget the night she swung from a rope and Holden ran for his life, hid in a wagon being prepared for going west, and didn't come out until hunger drove him to reveal he was a stowaway. Thank God the couple who owned the wagon were missionaries, heading west to spread the gospel and took him in as their own.

Muttering to himself, in order to solidify Collin's assumption that he was praying, Holden recalled seeing the winter-dormant shrubs growing along several knee-high picket fences. In the summer it had a

lovely purple flower that attracted many a homemaker to keep it in their yard. Only those learned in the art of herbs and plants knew it had many uses. Whores were known to render its oils to cause a seductive effect to their eyes. Dilated pupils gave them the appearance of lusting after the man in their company.

Sam Yorkshire was a problem Holden needed to deal with. He needed a plan to take him out of the competition for Beatrice's hand. Yes, Yorkshire would have to prove himself unworthy of her affections. Holden's eyes darted across the bottom of Collins' desk.

A strapping, good-looking cowboy like Yorkshire shouldn't be too hard to place in a compromising position with an unsuspecting lady about town. Surely someone was still unattached and vulnerable to Holden's influences. If he could assure Beatrice found Yorkshire with another woman, she would call off this silly competition and settle on him as her champion beau. They could be married before spring, if Holden played his cards right.

Holden lifted his head and met Collins stare. "Amen." He cleared his throat. "So, what subject are you preaching on this Sunday? How can I help?"

Chapter Nine

009



Holden Fabler sat in the short wooden pew Barnaby Collins has dragged to the front of the church to replace the single straight-back chair the pastor usually sat in alone. A cushion had been especially made for this pew to ease the discomfort of the hard wooden seat and straight back. Positioned across from Beatrice's piano and behind the pulpit, Holden had a kingly view of everything going on while the townsfolk gradually filled the sanctuary.

He and Collins had worked out the plan for Holden to make announcements, lead in prayer and close in prayer, while Collins, of course, would give the main sermon for *his* sheep.

Fabler had intentionally stood back to observe Collins' struggle with the heavy single chair and then the small wooden pew. He was red-faced and huffing for all he was worth, when he got the thing moved to where he wanted them. Holden considered Collins' exertion.

He'd lived a soft life. He turned to Beatrice swaying at the piano keys, her fingers dancing across the black and white ivories. It was preservice time. No one was singing, but he could hear Bea humming along with what she played. She seldom looked at the hymnal. In fact, she played with her eyes completely closed.

She knew every song by heart and appeared to enjoy the music that flowed from her fingertips. He smiled. Soon, she would be his. Her hands would serve him, and he would be her master... er, husband. He shook his head with a slight grin.

Holding the last chord, she opened her eyes, and caught him gawking at her. He quickly smiled. She returned his gesture, but caution filled her eyes. He winked with a nod of approval for her talent. She blushed. This was going to be easier than he had hoped. All he had to do was show Yorkshire to be less than honorable, and she'd open her heart to him. He'd insist on a quick matrimonial service and lock down his future with her.

A disturbance in the congregation caught his attention. He turned to see a dark blonde in a forest-green dress standing over a delicately gorgeous sun-kissed blonde gal in gaudy blue. "...Jillian, you dropped this outside." The one in green opened her hand to let a bangle bracelet fall to dangle between her manicured thumb and finger.

Holden smiled. He could sense a cat fight building. Surely these two would contain their spit-fire while inside the church. Or would they? He sat up straighter.

The one in blue, Jillian, glared at the one in green— he did not yet know her name. But before Jillian could speak the venomous words Holden knew she held within her luscious mouth, an elderly, bearded gentleman next to her leaned across her lap and ceased the claws from extending. "Why, that's most kind of you. Miss Erstwhile. Thank you."

Ah, Holden had a name for the one in green. Erstwhile. And what a name *that* was. But Jillian, the one in blue, corrected the old man. "Yes. Thank you." She turned to the elderly gentleman. "Only, it's Mrs. McCain now, daddy."

Ah ha! He was her father and she was a single woman. The other, the minx in green, was newly married, like so many here in Last Chance. Holden licked his lips in anticipation to what Mrs. McCain would do next. But it was the father who corrected himself with yet another expression of his gratitude. "Oh, well, thank you, *Mrs. McCain*."

The minx, Mrs. McCain, did not disappoint. "Certainly. It's delicate, Joss—I mean Jillian. You should be careful with it."

Holden nearly stood with an ovation. The cat fight continued as sharp as possible without actually drawing blood. Mispronouncing her name as if it was meaningless anyway and reprimanding her for being so careless.

Touché, my dear! That's checkmate and match! Holden sat back against the pew and grinned. He couldn't help himself. This catty little vixen sitting with her daddy just might be the very person Holden needed to get to know. She could very well be the answer to his

prayers and Mr. Yorkshire's undoing.

Pastor Collins walked up the aisle from his office, as if he had been praying or studying or something very important and couldn't be seen until it was time for the service to begin. Holden allowed a half smile to lift the corner of his mouth, observing Collins's subtle strategies to make his hierarchy known. It was interesting and duly noted.

The people waited in patient anticipation or neutral curiosity. Holden rather enjoyed watching them wait to find out who he was and why he was there. Little did they know, he was not just passing through. He had long-term plans to remain in this pulpit. He smiled his best, humble smile when Collins introduced him, then stood to replace Pastor Collins at the pulpit. They shook hands as if they were old friends, and Collins sat in the small pew with a slight chin lift.

Holden thanked Pastor Collins and Beatrice for welcoming him into town and their home. He especially noted Yorkshire's reaction to the news that he would remain in the pastor's home. Holden made the announcements he and Collins had discussed and glanced at Bea. She began playing the intro to the first pre-decided hymn.

Holden said, "Turn in your hymnal to page 152, 'How Great Thou Art.'" He smiled at Bea, and she began the chorus. Holden sang at the pulpit, letting his eyes sweep over the faces buried in the small song books. Two more hymns were sung before Holden sat down.

Pastor Collins took over the pulpit and preached his message on purity of heart when one petitions the cross. Fabler wondered how many unresolved burdens the women harbored toward their pastor for forcing them to find new husbands while their dead mates still lay in an open prairie buried only by the snow that killed them. He wondered if the congregants thought anything of Collins pausing in his message, to gulp down a glass of water. Did they realize their Pastor was in distress? Fabler could tell, and he barely knew the man. Surely his flock recognized the weakness of heart.

When the service was concluded, two couples were asked to come to the altar. A few other members of their family approached with them, and a quick wedding service was performed. Pastor Collins

had seemed to recover from his discomfort. Fabler marveled at how the senior pastor had the wedding message and vows memorized by now. Holden was fascinated how quickly Collins got to pronouncing them Man and Wife and the congregation stood for an ovation and cheers.

Holden stood with Collins at the door and received handshakes and words of welcome.

Mr. and Mrs. Weatherspoon ambled toward the door to greet the pastors. Their daughter walked slowly a step behind. Holden held the vixen, Jillian's gaze a little longer than he should have and squeezed her hand slightly as she shook his. Her eyes searched his face. He was accustomed to folks glaring at his scars.

"Uh, Daddy?" She glanced to her father, but still held on to Holden's hand. "Shouldn't we invite Pastor Collins and his guest preacher to our house for Sunday Dinner?" Her southern drawl salted every word with a spicy, rich tone. Her reaction was as he had hoped.

"Why, yes, of course." Mr. Weatherspoon looked to his wife. A look of concern filled her face, but she quickly smiled and nodded. "Of course. There's always room enough for Pastor Collins at our table... and his guest."

Holden smiled as Jillian hesitantly pulled her hand from his. "Momma had Elsie put a fine smoked roast in the oven before we all came to church." She looked across the sea of bonnets in the church yard to locate their kitchen help. "There's plenty. Y'all come on over soon as you're finished here. Oh, uh, bring Beatrice, too, if she's not... otherwise occupied."

Jillian glanced Beatrice's way. Holden followed her line of sight. Sam Yorkshire had stayed back in the sanctuary, until Bea had finished playing the piano. He now approached her. She flushed pink and stood with a nod. He had obviously asked her to join him for lunch.

"Well, much obliged, Brother Weatherspoon!" Pastor Collins answered the grizzly gentleman. "We will be happy to break bread with you and the missus this fine day." He glanced at Holden who lifted his brows in agreement and smiled humbly.

“I’m humbled and grateful for the invitation.” Holden shook Mr. Weatherspoon’s hand, then turned his attention to the sanctuary. The Weatherspoons moved forward, leaving the church. Yorkshire and Beatrice approached Collins and himself. “Fine sermon, Pastor.” Yorkshire offered.

Collins shook his hand dutifully and thanked him, but in his eyes was distrust and maybe even anger. “You hurry home, now, Bea. We have been invited to the Weatherspoons for dinner.” Collins informed her.

A frown replaced her pretty smile. “Dear brother, I have made my own plans.” She smiled up at Yorkshire and returned her gaze to Collins. “I’ll see you later... for tea, or supper.”

Mr. Yorkshire tipped his hat. He and Beatrice walked out of the church, into the sunlight, and Holden grinned while glaring fiery daggers into the back of Yorkshire’s head. Holden needed to get on with his plan to expose that man before Beatrice became too attached. Spending the afternoon with the Weatherspoons fell right in with his plans. Soon Yorkshire would be caught in a snare and Bea would not be so obliged to keep company with him. Holden could step in, pick up the pieces of her heart and marry into the family before anybody was the wiser.



Bea and Sam strolled from the church down Main Street to Dawson’s. Hollie and Mr. Tucker would open soon after services were over. Menu items would be limited to what Mr. Tucker could heat through on the stove and sandwiches. The slow roasting meats, stew, or chicken and dumplings wouldn’t be available until evening.

Beatrice was always one of the last to leave the sanctuary. She stayed at the piano, playing softly as the people emptied the pews, then she tidied up the sanctuary, assuring all the candles were extinguished, and walked out to find her brother. Today was a little different. Sam Yorkshire had lingered to escort her to lunch. He even helped her pick up left-behind papers and personal items unnoticed upon leaving like a glove or a hanky between the rows. She had a

special basket where she put those items and people knew to go there to look for their lost belongings.

Bea walked at a leisurely pace enjoying the slightly warmer air. It was a lovely day considering it was December. Christmas was coming and with it there would probably be more snow. The clouds in the distance confirmed it looked like a cold front might be developing. Here in Nebraska, one never knew from one hour to the next what the weather would do. Especially after the freak storms in September, no one took any chances anymore. Bea pulled her wrap a little tighter despite the slightly warmer weather.

She enjoyed walking at Sam's side, even with the ominous look toward the northern horizon, and didn't mind taking her time strolling down Main Street to the diner. Besides, there was no hurry, since they could see Hollie and her beau walking a few yards ahead of them.

So that was who Hollie had matched herself to. Sam had no idea how narrowly he had come to walking with her now, instead of Bea.

Rumors indicated Hollie and her sister, Becca, had it all worked out with no hard feelings among them. But what about Sam Yorkshire? Had either of them checked to see if Sam had resolved the mix up? If he was alright with no hard feelings? Well, Beatrice smiled at the thought, Sam was alright. Bea made sure of it and in her mind, this was the better match. For Sam. For Hollie. For herself.

It was very likely Hollie and Becca did know Sam was favoring Beatrice's company. The gossip mongrels missed very few details of anyone's lives and made sure the whole town knew, starting at the general store.

Bea squeezed Sam's arm as they walked. He put his hand over hers at his elbow in that affectionate way she had grown to love.

"What?" He leveled his eyes with hers.

"Nothing." Bea felt the heat fill her cheeks. "I was just thinking how nice everything turned out. I hope you're happy with how things turned out, Sam. Hollie Dawson seems to have made other choices, but I hope you are happy."

He smiled. "I am, Bea. I'm very happy with how things turned out."

They walked in silence the rest of the way to Dawson's Diner. Bea felt comfortable at his side even with the silence. There was no need for conversation. It felt right. As if they had done this for a long time. She prayed they would be this happy for a long time to come.

Entering the diner, along with a few other new couples, Sam and Bea took a table for two. Marcus, Hollie's other orphaned ward, hurried to tie an apron and began taking drink orders. Hollie rushed to the back and Mr. Tucker fired up the stove. Bea could hear them talking through the little pass-through window. She smiled at Sam.

"I have good news." Sam returned her smile.

"Oh! What?" A warm sensation filled Bea's insides. What good news could he be about to share with her? He'd only been here shy of a week. Was he ready to propose already?

"I spoke to Dave McFarland in the livery about opening up a farrier's shop and he referred me to the new blacksmith, Mr. Wolfe Laingsburg, on Fourth Street. Turns out the shop right across the street and next to the wagon maker is available and I bought the place yesterday.

"Oh, that is good news! Mr. Laingsburg has been in Last Chance since... November... Thanksgiving day, in fact." She laughed. "He married Altar Pennington. They have brand new twin boys, well, they are her late husband's babies, of course, but I heard Mr. Laingsburg arrived just in time to help her deliver the boys and just fell in love with them and their momma." Bea blushed. "I guess most of the men you see here are new." Sadness filled Bea's heart. "But I'm so happy for you. That sounds like a perfect location to shod horses. Across from the blacksmith. Will Mr. Laingsburg make the shoes for you?"

"That's the great part. He said I could borrow his fire, I've got my own equipment, and can make them myself. It'll take a small load off him and there are horse stalls beside his shop I can use, plus it's just a short ways from McFarland's livery."

"Wonderful." Bea enjoyed the twinkle in his eyes. Things were coming together for him, and she could be a part of it, if he continued to let her.

"And, Miss Bea, I want you to be there when I set up shop.

Maybe we could make it a celebration, a dedication to the new businesses in Last Chance for all the new shop owners.” He hesitated. “Would that be callous? I know you guys have grieving hearts. I don’t want to overlook respecting the ones you lost so recently.”

“Well, perhaps you should set up shop quietly for now, but come spring, there’s talk about having a memorial for those we lost and after that it would be good to turn around and celebrate the ones who have come here to keep things going.”

Sam smiled. “All right. That’s what I’ll do. Set up shop and keep things going. Come Spring, we’ll arrange with the City Council to have a Grand Opening after the memorial.” He snapped a nod. “Would you like to walk down there on your way home and take a look at my new shop?”

“I’d love to.” Bea grinned.

Just then, Marcus slid up next to their table. “What can I get y’all to drink?”

Chapter Ten

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“My goodness, I don’t know when I’ve had a meal as fine as this, Mrs. Weatherspoon.” Holden Fabler leaned back in his chair, patting his belly.

Mrs. Weatherspoon sputtered, blushed, and began gathering the dishes. “Well, we do what we can these days. Thank God Mrs. Barnes was able to fire up her late husband’s smoker and preserve all that beef that succumbed to the storm.”

Holden held her gaze with a huge bawdy smile. “Yes... thank God for such amazing miracles. Out of tragedy comes triumph.”

Pastor Collins cleared his throat.

Holden glanced his way. “Oh, here. Let me and *Jillian* take care of these dishes, Mrs. Weatherspoon.” He let his eyes meet Jillian’s. She blinked, astonished at the notion of being volunteered to clean the table. “Uh, sure, Momma. Pastor Fabler and I will take them to Elsie to wash up.”

They stacked the plates and silverware together and balanced the piles in their arms, making their way through the swinging door and into the kitchen. Elsie sat at the chopping block, eating her own meal. She leapt to her feet when Jillian entered. “Here.” Jillian shoved her stack of dishes into Elsie’s hands. “Give her your dishes.” She turned to Holden, but he could see that Elsie’s hands were already full. He took them to the washboard instead and gently set them down.

“Uh, Miss Jillian, I wonder if I might have a word?”

She glanced at Elsie. “Of course, Pastor Fabler. What is it?”

“I really appreciate you inviting Beatrice Collins here today. I’m powerfully sorry she didn’t accept your generous offer to sup with your family.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Well, I—”

“You know...” Holden continued. “I was asked here to Last

Chance to marry Miss Bea, but that Sam Yorkshire rather stepped in our way, if you know what I mean.”

Jillian touched her hair, patting it unnecessarily into place. “Yes. I heard.”

“Well, I don’t mean to begrudge any man his rightful due, but I was promised by Pastor Collins that Beatrice would become my bride. And while Mr. Yorkshire is a fine, strapping, cowboy with strong, rippling muscles, and a means for a steady income.” He watched Jillian’s eyes dilate with thoughts about Mr. Yorkshire’s physique. “I mean, he says he was a farrier’s apprentice and plans on starting his own shop here.”

“Yes. I’ve heard that, also.” Jillian stared off at nothing, mesmerized by her own thoughts about the handsome cowboy.

“It’s just not right, that my bride should be taken from me due to a misunderstanding at the church. You know his intended up and run off with another feller.”

Jillian smiled but quickly gained control of her lips and forced a sorrowful frown. “Yes. I heard that, too.”

“Well, excuse me for saying so, but in my opinion, I’d think a devilishly handsome fellow like Sam Yorkshire would make a fine, respectable woman such as yourself a better husband than he would Miss Bea. I mean she’s perfect for me. A pastor wants a genteel woman at his side. But a horse-shoeing cowboy prefers a beautiful trophy on his arm, don’t you think?”

“Yes.” She started and blinked, refocusing on his gaze. “I mean. I am so sorry this has happened to you. You deserve better. Miss Bea has never gone against her brother’s wishes before... not that I’ve ever known. I wonder what lead her astray this time?” She blinked several times, feigning innocence.

“Oh, you know, the devil comes to kill, steal, and destroy. I’m sure she has just got caught up in a devil’s snare. I’m certain if I could just get Miss Beatrice’s mind off Mr. Yorkshire for a day, I could win her back and walk her down the aisle, like her brother promised.”

Jillian nodded. “How can I help?”

Holden let his eyes widen. “Why, Miss Jillian! I never thought

about you being able to help me! But now that you mention it, that's an excellent idea. And, who knows, this just might win you a virile beau in the process." He let his eyes drop to the abundant cleavage at the top of her blue gown. "I'll bet the two of you will make a fine couple... and produce lots of beautiful babies, to boot. I'll bet Mr. and Mrs. Weatherspoon would love a house full of grandchildren." He laughed. "It really sounds like the best idea. You, my dear woman, are a genius. Why didn't I think of this sooner?"

Jillian blushed but grinned from ear to ear, taking on his flattery and nestling into his plan like a warm, overstuffed quilt.

"Wha-what exactly do you think I should do?"

"Well. I was thinking..." He draped his arm around her shoulders and spoke quietly while he guided her toward the backdoor. Once in the yard, away from the house servant's hearing, he laid out his simple plan.

"Jillian!" Mr. Weatherspoon bellowed at the backdoor.

"Coming Daddy!" She answered. "We better get back inside."

"Of course." Fabler walked beside her to the stoop. "Remember what I said. Timing is everything."

She nodded. "Of course. I'll make up an excuse why I need to go to the haberdashery and I'll be there tomorrow morning at eleven."

"Good." Fabler smiled at her.

"What are you two doing out here, alone?" Mr. Weatherspoon glared at Holden.

"We were praying, Daddy." Jillian lied without a moment's hesitation. She was good. Holden knew he'd chosen well and his plan to undermine Yorkshire was soon to be a reality.

"I can't thank you enough for dinner." Fabler reiterated as he walked into the parlor where Pastor Collins looked disgruntled. "Should we be getting home, Barnaby?"

Pastor Collins's eyes widened at the use of his Christian name, but let it slide in front of his congregants. "Yes. I'm sure we've overstayed our welcome." His glaring eyes were not missed by Fabler, but hopefully went unnoticed by the Weatherspoons.

"Good day to ya, then, Pastor Collins." The grizzly man shook

Pastor Collins's hand vigorously, then Holden's.

Mrs. Weatherspoon nodded farewell and Jillian smiled.

Barnaby and Holden walked outside and turned to make their way to the parsonage. "What was all that about?" Barnaby queried as they walked.

"Oh, nothing," Holden smiled. "Jillian's going to help me with a little task, that's all."

Barnaby held his curious glare a little longer, but when Holden said no more, Pastor Collins fell silent the remainder of the walk home.



"Miss Bea," Holden Fabler dared to reach over and take Beatrice's hand as they strolled through the dead grass of the church lawn. They entered the simple gate to the cemetery and continued walking among the various markers. "I love walking through a cemetery, don't you? It's such a peaceful place and reminds me we all have a certain number of days on the earth."

She nodded. "Yes, I suppose you are right," Bea said sweetly.

It was Pastor Fabler's turn to share supper with her and she had cooked a simple meal of pancakes, molasses, and bacon. She and Barnaby did this often on Sundays since they generally had a large meal with one of the congregants or all of them once a month when the town came together for a fellowship meal after services.

She refused to give Mr. Fabler a three-course meal every time he shared supper with her, although she understood as a traveling pastor, he didn't have a surplus of funds to take her out to eat every other evening, like Sam Yorkshire did when it was his turn. Lunch, too, she kept the meal simple, making sandwiches or serving him cold fried chicken from the night before. This was her lifestyle and if he wanted her to take him seriously as a candidate for her hand, he'd better get used to the simplicity in which she lived her life.

"Of course, I'm right. the Bible says that very thing. 'He knows the number of hairs on our heads and days we shall live upon the earth.'"

She knew he'd misquoted the verse but didn't correct him. He was making a point not giving a sermon. Inhaling deeply, she nodded.

"I want you to promise me something." Fabler stopped and took both her hands into his. He gazed into her eyes tenderly. A gravestone stood just to her left. She knew it well. It belonged to Winnie Grace, and her baby who had died in the September storm. She tried not to let it distract her while Mr. Fabler spoke. He obviously was sharing his heart and she needed to give him her undivided attention.

"What's that." She said softly.

"I want you to take your time getting to know Mr. Yorkshire and me. Really compare the two. I'm certain, if you do, that you'll soon realize, while he may not be ruffraff, like Barnaby said, you'll soon see that a cowboy like Yorkshire can be... a hard man to wrangle. He's like a wild mustang. All he really wants is to run wild and be with whichever mare he can claim in his harem."

Bea blushed. "I think you have misjudged, Sam."

"Shhh!" Fabler touched her lips gently with his index finger. It was very intimate and stirred feelings in her she hadn't felt before. "I'm just saying, promise me, that if you see evidence of wanderlust in his eyes... or his actions... you'll stop and think about what I said." He shrugged. "That's all I ask."

Bea frowned. "All right, Mr. Fabler. I promise. If I see a mustang's spirit in Mr. Yorkshire, I'll remember what you told me tonight, and I will use that information to guide me in making my decision between you two."

"Good." He turned and let her one hand fall, but continued holding the hand closest to him as they walked through to the other side of the cemetery.

A large, dark cloud built in the sky above them and wind began to whip up around her, lifting her hem and exposing her boot. "We should be getting back."

He looked at her curiously. She knew she was overreacting to the beginnings of a storm, but like so many in Last Chance, they no longer trusted the weather. He put his arm around her shoulder and held her close to his body. "It's all right. I'm here. I will get you home safely."

She nodded as a shiver rippled down her back. "Let's hurry."

"Of course, my dear." He gave her a little squeeze and pushed her along. They were only a few yards from the parsonage when the sky opened up and sleet began to pelt them with a driving wind. Bea hunkered against Fabler, and he held his arm over her. "You're all right. We're almost home." He reassured her.

Leaping onto the porch, he shoved open the door and pushed her inside, while he remained there, shaking the wet sleet off his overcoat. She turned. "Oh, don't stand out in the cold. You'll freeze—"

The words froze in her throat. Her heart pounded painfully in her chest. She didn't want any harm to come to him. While she didn't feel what she ought in order to marry him, she realized at this moment, she didn't want him to die like all the others in another blizzard. If this was a blizzard. As of now, it was wind and sleet, but by morning, it could be much more. Time would tell and she wanted him inside and safe. She grabbed at his arm and pulled him inside.

He stumbled over the threshold, with his coat part way off his shoulders. He fell into her, and she staggered back, slamming into the foyer door casing that separated it from the parlor. His eyes flicked between hers and she held his darting gaze. He lowered his face, closer, closer to her. Anticipation of his lips touching hers filled her midsection and her heart pounded like a big bass drum in her ears.

"Beatrice!" Barnaby's voice broke the spell. Bea fell back from Mr. Fabler.

"There's a storm blowing in! Thank God you got home all right." He rushed to them from the kitchen door. Had he been in the backyard watching the storm roll in?

"Yes. We just made it." She pushed a wet strand of hair from her face. Heat filled her cheeks. Had her brother seen Mr. Fabler nearly kiss her?

"I-I'm going to bed." She stammered and ran to her room.

"You all right, son." She heard Barnaby say to Mr. Fabler.

"I'm finer than frog's hair." She heard Mr. Fabler reply. That was an odd expression. Did he not realize how quickly a storm like this could overtake a person and they could freeze to death? She stripped

out of her wet clothes and put on a warm flannel nightgown, crawled into bed, and sat with her back against the headboard. She wrapped her arms around her knees and listened to the storm. It whipped and howled against her window and whistled through vents in the attic. She shivered.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Eleven

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Bea bolted straight up in bed. The Rooster dream again! The storm that had beat against her window during the night had conjured up that giant rooster snatching her from her bed again. The windowpane looked wet and plastered with dead leaves. Beyond it appeared to be calm.

A faint orange and pink glow illuminated her room. It was morning and she had beat Sampson, the real rooster, awake. Would she ever outgrow the nightmare rooster that plagued her slumber?

She threw back her covers and tossed on her dressing gown and slippers. She needed to make cookies and muffins for Heather at the church and today... she thought a minute, was it Sam Yorkshire's turn to take her to lunch. Would he mind if she made a picnic and they ate it in the barn? She glanced outside. Little balls of sleet stacked against the barn and tree trunks, but it had not accumulated like the blizzard had. In fact, she could see the ground everywhere except where it had blown against the sides of the building.

Padding to the kitchen, she welcomed the warmth of the stove and a cup of hot coffee. As she entered the kitchen, she slammed to a halt. "OH!"

"Good morning." Mr. Fabler sat at the small table where she made biscuits and rolled out the cookie dough. He rose and walked toward her. Was he going to try to kiss her again? Panic tightened her throat, and she took a step back. But he veered at the last minute and reached for the blue enamel coffee pot. "I made coffee. Want some?"

"Y-yes, please." She tried to get ahold of herself. She was still shaking from that stupid dream. Tying her dressing gown a little tighter around her waist, she walked to the cupboard and took down two coffee mugs. He filled them both and sat back down. Had he been here all night? "Did you not sleep well?"

"Naw. Storms and I don't get along. I suppose it's cause I sleep

outdoors often, and being caught out in a storm isn't much fun."

"No. I'm sure it isn't." Sadness filled her heart. How had her friends and loved ones suffered back in September when they died during the blizzard? "Listen, I'd love to cook you a hearty breakfast, but I've got muffins and cookies to make for the grooms coming to the church. I'll leave you and Barnaby two each, but that's all I can do for you. But could you do me a favor?"

"What's that?" Mr. Fabler looked at her as if he were bored, or sleepy.

"Could you keep an eye on my brother? He didn't look so good last night. If he's getting sick, I need to know. Heather Barnes is the closest we have to a doctor in Last Chance, so I can send her over if Barnaby is coming down with something."

"Sure." Mr. Fabler focused on his coffee.

"Hey," She offered. "Maybe Barnaby will fry you up some bacon or sausage. We've got both down in the root cellar— if he's feeling all right this morning."

"I'm sure I'll be all right. Go on about your business. Don't worry about me." He turned from her and carried his coffee into the parlor. He laid down on the divan and pulled a quilt over his shoulder. It wasn't him she was worried about. She'd made that plain enough. Perhaps he hadn't gotten any sleep and was confused.

She wondered if he'd tried to sleep there last night? Or had her brother? Either way, Barnaby was in his bed now and Mr. Fabler was left with the divan. No wonder he was groggy.

A few hours later, Bea placed her hat on her head and secured it with three pins. She turned back to the interior of the parish and called out. "I'm going to the church. There's muffins on the counter for you and Mr. Fabler. See ya later." She closed the door but then remembered one more thing and shoved it open a little. "Mr. Yorkshire will be coming to take me to lunch. I thought we'd have a picnic in the barn if it's not too cold. So don't eat all the bread for breakfast."

Satisfied she had said all she needed to, she walked across the street with her two baskets of tea treats and greeted Heather.

She went about her morning in the sanctuary, helping Heather prepare for whoever would show up today. But her mind was on lunch, and she hoped the sun warmed thing up a little. Christmas was less than a week away. A little snow would be nice. So long as it wasn't a life-changing storm. She trotted down into the basement and began hauling boxes of Christmas decorations up to the ground level. Barnaby always let her decorate the sanctuary as long as Christmas was right after the next Sunday. This year, Christmas fell on a Wednesday. She set about putting everything up. Maybe she'd ask Sam to cut down an evergreen tree for the Church foyer and one for her and Barnaby at home.

Mr. Fabler, too. She thought with a guilty conscience. She'd nearly kissed him last night and here she'd forgotten about him being in her home this morning. She hoped she could make up her mind soon. This having two men courting her was growing old fast.

Bea considered stepping over to the school and ask Millie if the children could cut and glue a colorful paper chain for her Christmas tree and to hang around the sanctuary. That is, if she had any construction paper left. Supplies were short at the school, after keeping the kids for several days until their parents' fate could be determined, and then a few days more until survivors could take the orphaned children into their homes. Well, it wouldn't hurt to ask, she slipped out the back of the church and scooted over to the schoolhouse.

That settled and back in the sanctuary, Bea smiled as she thought about her picnic in the barn with Sam Yorkshire. She had to be honest, even though Mr. Fabler, like her brother, tried to make her think all cowboys were alike and Mr. Yorkshire would soon break her heart, she hadn't seen any evidence of it and was leaning pretty heavily toward choosing the new farrier for her husband.

Chapter Twelve

108



Holden Fabler rose from the white-washed, cane-back rocker like he owned the porch. The man's huge grin gave Sam Yorkshire pause. What was he up to?

"Howdy-do, Yorkshire." Fabler tipped his hat.

Sam stopped walking and eyed the traveling pastor. "It's a might chilly to be sitting on the porch, Fabler."

"Naw, it's not so bad, really. I gotta cup o' coffee" —he held his mug up— "and where I'm sittin' I got the sun shining on me, warming my bones."

Sam nodded. "I suppose you do." He looked around, still wondering what Fabler was up to. "Is Miss Bea home yet from the church?"

"Nah. She said she'd be late today." His eyes flitted toward the church and back to Sam. He glanced but didn't see Bea coming yet.

"All right." Sam held his spot. He had no intention of sitting with Fabler on the porch like they were companions. "She say about when she'd be ready?"

"Nah. I reckon she was making up some excuse to stay longer than need be seeings how I saw Mrs. Barnes leave the church an hour ago. I don't reckon there's been any new grooms arriving today anyhow. Bea's probably just bidin' her time 'til she can tell you she wants to marry me." Fabler chuckled.

"I doubt that's true." Sam muttered.

"I can't blame her, really." Fabler went on as if he hadn't heard Sam's comment. "Have you done anything *for* her... besides buying her food to eat? Not very personal, feeding her."

"What're you talking about?" Sam's brow folded over above his nose. Fabler was playing at something, he just couldn't figure out what.

"Well." Fabler eyebrows rose high on his forehead, making his

hat slide back a bit. “I mean, a girl like Bea, well, any girl, really, prefers some trinket or such that shows you care, that you know her *real well* and want to buy her something she will appreciate. You know something *personal*, like... oh I don’t know... I probably shouldn’t divulge what I’ve learned about Bea. A man can’t reveal all his sources for wooing his gal, can he?” He grinned at Sam. “If I were you, I’d seek help from some of them ladies’ shops down toward the depot. I’m sure they’d be able to tell you what Bea likes... and don’t like.”

Sam just gawked at the man. What was he going on about?

Fabler shrugged lazily. “Ain’t none of my business, and frankly, you’re doing me a favor by not worrying about being sweet on Miss Bea. She seems like the kind of woman who don’t need to be... lavished with gifts or nice things... but deep down, every woman wants a man to spend something on them... besides just buying them food.” He drew out his words like he had been raised in the south. Had he lied about being from New York State?

“I was just thinking about going to the haberdashery myself.” Fabler stuck his hands in his pants pockets and rocked up on his toes. “I noticed that bonnet of hers could do with some new ribbons. Something new to add to it would spruce it up and make it look good as new.” He drew in a long deep breath and let it out. “But Barnaby, I mean, Pastor Collins asked me to wait here ’til he was ready to go to the church. Seems he needs my help moving some heavy furniture around to get ready for a nativity scene. Oh!” He gasped. “Maybe that’s why Bea is lingering in the church this morning. She’s getting ready for Christmas. Hmm, wonder why she didn’t ask you to help with the heavy lifting, seeings how you’re on her schedule for midday courting and all?”

Sam stared at Fabler. Why was he telling him all this? Could it be true that Bea wanted ribbons for her bonnet? What was all this about helping decorate at the church? Should he go to the church and see if she needed or wanted his help? She’d made it very clear she wanted time to herself of a morning. Would he be intruding into her alone time if he checked on her? No. She was very clear about this schedule and Sam didn’t want to show any disrespect by showing up

when he wasn't supposed to.

But how could he have been so naïve to think just because Bea was the pastor's sister, she wouldn't want nice things for herself? "Well, I— If you see Miss Bea, tell her I'll be back in an hour to take her to lunch."

"Sure thing." Fabler drawled. "...if I see her."

Sam turned around and hurried back down Main Street. He had seen a haberdashery. Surely, the owner would be a woman and she'd be willing to help him. Women know women. She'd know what Bea Collins would like.

Surely, he could buy her something pretty and persuade her he was a generous beau, not a stingy one. He felt in his gut Fabler would be stingy once he wasn't trying to impress her anymore.

Something deep in Sam's gut, like an instinct to watch out for a rattler, told Sam that Fabler was like a wolf in sheepskin hiding among the flock. Even if Sam couldn't convince Bea to marry him, he had to expose Fabler for who he really was.

But what if Fabler was dumber than he looked and had just inadvertently revealed something he didn't mean to. What if Bea really did make her judgements between the two of them based on how sweet they were on her. Buying her a gift or two couldn't hurt anything. Maybe he should have been picking some winter greenery, too, since there weren't any wildflowers. A girl always enjoys a bouquet, didn't they?

Would Bea like that?

Better safe than sorry.

Sam walked a little faster to the haberdashery.

[OB!]



Bea jerked, startled out of her wits, when Barnaby and Holden entered the church chuckling rather loudly. It had been so quiet in the church all morning. The jocularly felt intrusive. She had strung popcorn and red berries around the sanctuary. Set out extra candleholders and put new tapers in each one. She'd pressed and re-tied red and green ribbons on each. On the pew ends she had tied

green pine boughs with red ribbon. Now that her brother was here, she'd ask him to cut down a tree, or have someone do it for him, and bring up the nativity pieces from the basement.

Otis Ignatius Graham had carved the pieces many, many years ago, when his life was less of a shambles. They were still beautiful, about two to three feet in height depending on if they were people standing or kneeling. The animals of course were proportional to the people whether they stood on all four or were curled up on the ground. There was a Mary, Joseph, an empty manger, a cow, a donkey, two sheep and a shepherd, three kings and a star that they hung above it all from the rafters by fishing line.

Bea wondered which newborn baby they would lay in the manger this year. Each year Bea touched up the paint on the carved pieces and they were good as new. Mr. Graham had whittled the pieces throughout his first year in Last Chance, long ago, and had presented them to the church. Story goes it wasn't long after that Christmas that he lost his child and found solace in the cup.

Bea couldn't remember a Christmas without these pieces or Otis being intoxicated. Since he wandered back into town after the blizzards and told everyone what had happened to the men on the hunt, he seemed to be sober, for the most part. Certain things became a tradition after a while, but tragedy has a way of changing traditions.

Christmas was her favorite time of year, especially decorating for it. This being the first Christmas without all the men who had died in the blizzard, it was even more important for Bea to make the sanctuary look and feel like it always did, even if the congregation did not look the same. Reaching the end of what she could do today, she grabbed for her bonnet, preparing to go meet Sam for lunch.

"Oh, Miss Collins." Pastor Fabler veered away from Barnaby who held the basement door open, ready for them both to go down to fetch the nativity pieces. Bea glanced at her brother, who no longer looked amused by whatever they had been laughing about. He looked impatient.

"Yes, Pastor Fabler?" Bea addressed her suitor.

"Mr. Yorkshire dropped by the house to say he didn't have time

for lunch with you today. He said something about, ‘go ahead without him, he had some errands that were more important.’ I suppose he’s got something urgent in regard to his new farrier shop.” Fabler shrugged. “I’m not too sure what he meant. If it were me, I’d make you my priority and setting up shop could wait until I wasn’t scheduled to spend time with you. But... to each his own, I suppose.”

He sighed, his eyes dropping to her bonnet in her hands. “You know, that old bonnet of yours could use some sprucing up a bit. Maybe as an early Christmas present, I’ll get you some new ribbons for it.”

Disappointment flooded Bea’s heart. Why couldn’t Sam have lunch with her and then tend to his business at the new shop? Fabler was right though. Her bonnet was looking worn. Since she now had time, perhaps she would walk down to the haberdashery and look at the ribbons. On her way, she could stop by Sam’s new shop and see how it was coming. Bea raised her chin a notch. “I can buy my own ribbons, Mr. Fabler.”

“Oh, well. It was just a thought.” Fabler smiled sweetly and rushed to the door her brother held open. “Uh, be right there, Pastor Collins.” He turned back to Bea. “Too bad about your lunch engagement, though. Will I see you for supper?”

“Of course.” Bea replied. It was what was scheduled, although she found herself preferring the company of Sam Yorkshire, not Holden Fabler. But a promise was a promise and she had promised these two she would take her time, get to know them slowly, and then make the decision who she would marry.

Could she make that decision by Christmas? Was Wednesday long enough to weigh the differences between these two men? Christmas... or maybe New Year’s day? The first day of the brand new year, that would be a good day to make such an important decision.

To be honest with herself and God, it couldn’t be too soon! She was ready this minute to announce her decision... but that wouldn’t be fair. She was not a promise breaker.

Pastor Fabler disappeared with her brother down into the basement, and Bea put her tattered bonnet on her head. She walked

purposefully toward the haberdashery. Her eyes darted toward Fourth Street where Sam's new shop was on the corner, but she kept walking toward the haberdashery. Slipping into the quaint shop, she heard a familiar voice.

"Why, Mr. Yorkshire." Jillian giggled. "You're so big and strong." Jillian Weatherspoon's disembodied southern drawl came from behind a row of fabric bolts. Bea cautiously stepped around the obstruction. Sam held Jillian in his arms, as if they were dancing and he had just dipped her for the finale. Bea gasped.

Sam struggled to right Jillian, who didn't seem any too eager to be righted. She had an odd smile on her face, rather than shame or embarrassment for being caught in such a compromising position with Bea's suitor. "What's going on?" Bea muttered.

"Miss Bea, I can explain." Sam stammered.

"Why, Bea Collins, as I live and breathe." Jillian's shrill southern drawl raked all over Bea's nerves. "How in the world are you?" She swallowed as her feet touched the ground solidly so that she could stand on her own. "I was just trying to reach that box up there and slipped. Your Mr. Yorkshire was kind enough to catch me in his big, strong arms and kept me from breaking my little ol' neck, I suppose." She straightened her hat and smoothed her skirts.

Bea's eyes darted from Jillian to Sam and back to Jillian. "He did? Wh-what are you doing in a women's haberdashery in the first place, Mr. Yorkshire? I thought you had work to tend to in your shop?"

"I-no, I—" He just couldn't find his words. He cleared his throat. "I thought you were busy at the church, so I was biding my time."

"I see that." Bea glared at the still grinning Jillian Weatherspoon.

"No. I mean. I thought I would come in here and..." He swallowed hard. "I thought the owner could help me find something for... for a Christmas present."

"Christmas?" Bea grabbed hold of her temper and shoved it back behind her like a misbehaving toddler. She cleared her throat and regained her composure. Of course, that made perfect sense, but why was he holding Jillian? Oh, she had fallen. Of course, he caught her to

keep her from breaking her... neck.

"Well, thank God you were here at just the right time." Bea forced herself to speak calmly. "Where is Mrs. Grayson anyway?"

Jillian inhaled. "I believe she's in the back. I had asked her if my order had come in and Genevieve went back there to check." Jillian offered, innocently enough. Bea did her best to calm herself down. This wasn't what it looked like.

Or was it? Sam was a cowboy after all. And weren't all cowboys a bit of a flirt when it came to the ladies? With Bea busy at the church, Sam was free to wander the streets and fraternize with whomever he happened to run into. And of course, Jillian Weatherspoon was a bit of a flirt anyway. Or at least she came across that way. What with her southern accent and spoiled rotten personality, what man wouldn't be compelled to associate with her? The control she had managed to wrangle, slowly slipped out of her grasp.

Tears stung in Bea's eyes. Her lips quivered. She swallowed hard. "Oh, Sam. How could you!"

She turned and ran from the store. Grabbing her skirts so she wouldn't trip, she ran as best she could down the boardwalk.

"Bea!" Sam called after her but she ignored him.

Hollie Dawson crossed the street at Fourth and stepped onto the boardwalk, just as Bea leapt into Fourth Street mindlessly running toward the parsonage. They very nearly collided in midair.

"Oh, Beatrice!" Hollie gasped.

"Hollie!" Bea stumbled trying to halt her momentum. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you—"

"Listen." Hollie glanced around. "I'm so glad I ran into you. I've been wanting to thank you for taking... that man. I'm just so grateful. I know the way I left him at the church the day he arrived wasn't kind, but I understand it all worked out, right? Isn't he courting you now? And you look so happy! Really you do."

Bea huffed, now was not the time to be telling her how good she looked having Sam Yorkshire as her beau. It just wasn't the right time. "I-I, uh, sure, Hollie. I'm glad everything worked out for you. Now, if

you'll excuse me, I must be getting home." Her voice betrayed her as tears tightened her throat when she uttered "getting home." More tears were coming and she prayed she could keep them at bay until she was in the privacy of her own bedroom. She veered around Hollie and continued trotting toward the sanctity of the parsonage.

Tossing herself on her bed, she cried into her pillow. Why had she been such a fool? How could she ever think a handsome cowboy like Sam Yorkshire would ever seriously consider courting a simple girl like her? What a fool she had been. Maybe Barnaby had been right all along. As much as she didn't feel anything toward Holden Fabler, he was the better choice for her to marry. At least he wouldn't seek the affections of another woman when her back was turned.

Chapter Thirteen

1081



Holden Fabler pushed through the kitchen's swinging door. Bea looked up from kneading biscuit dough.

Fabler tsked his tongue. "I'm sorry I can't take you to the diner or, better yet, to that fancy hotel down the way."

Fabler said it in a soft, empathetic, lilting voice Bea had not heard from him before.

She shrugged as she turned the dough over on itself and pressed the heels of her hand into the mound. "It's not a problem, Pastor Fabler. I'm quite accustomed to a simple pastor's way of life. We don't eat outside of this house unless a member of the congregation is kind enough to invite us to their home or offers to pay for a restaurant." She glanced at him. "It wouldn't look right to be openly spending the congregation's tithes and offerings on ourselves."

Fabler sidled up next to her and gently took her chin into his hand, lifting her face to his. "Why do you look so sad?"

She pulled out of his grasp and turned away with a shrug. "It's nothing." She took the rolling pin out of the crockery and began shoving the dough into a round, flat, workable glob for punching out biscuits.

"Has Yorkshire done something?" Fabler held up his hand as if to stop himself. "Nope. None of my business..." He dropped his hand and leaned into her. "Unless he has... and you want to talk about it." His face softened. "Bea, you can talk to me, even if it's just to sort out your feelings. I understand having two suitors is... troubling, and I honestly can't imagine the pressure that's on you to make a decision. I'm here for you... if you need a friend... just a friend... to talk to."

Bea jabbed the biscuit cutter into the dough and placed them in a lard smeared tin pan. She glanced at him as she flopped the biscuits, one by one, in three rows. "That's very kind of you." She finally uttered and placed the tin in the oven.

Stirring gravy that had just began to bubble, she considered his words. He had been more... tolerable lately. Perhaps she had judged him wrong in the beginning. With Christmas just around the corner, the whole town seemed to be more tolerable lately. Gone was the morose atmosphere of mourning widows. Heaven help them all, there was a sensation of excitement as more and more grooms were showing up and weddings were conducted. Hardly a Sunday went by without at least one wedding after service. She wondered how many there would be this next service with it being Christmas and not a Sunday.

She turned to find Fabler still patiently standing at the big table where she prepared the biscuits. A calm smile curled at his lips. He seemed genuinely interested in why she was not her jovial self. She opened her mouth but hesitated. Was it fair to tell him how much her heart hurt when she caught Sam and Jillian in the haberdashery?

"It's nothing." Bea said at last.

"Bea. I don't know you well, but I can tell you are hurting. If it's not Yorkshire, then is it your brother? I've had some concerns about him too.

With this, she darted her eyes to meet his. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I hate to cause any alarms if none is needed... but Barnaby looks a bit... I don't know. Perhaps he's just weak of the heart. It happens to a man when he's under a lot of pressure. Certainly, he's been worried about you and your future. Now, I understand why you want to weigh your options. But I can see where taking your time, too much time, to make such an important decision is seriously affecting Barnaby."

"Do you honestly think that?"

Holden tilted his head with a shrug. "You, too, seem to have a heavy burden weighting on your heart. Please, let me help. At least, let me be a shoulder to cry on, an ear to hear. I'm a very good listener." He wiggled his eyebrows. "It sort of comes with the profession."

Wiggling his eyebrows in that playful way, made her smile. He smiled too, looking hopeful. She really shouldn't speak of it. Not with the man she considered her other suitor. It just wouldn't be right. She

shook her head. “You are here to enjoy supper and for us to get to know one another better. You don’t need to listen to me going on about—”

She pushed the pan of gravy off the hot burner to the back area of the stove. Lifting the padded pocket of her apron, she checked the biscuits. A delightful aroma of biscuits and meat wafted from the oven. She inhaled. “Supper’s nearly ready, could you go tell Barnaby?”

She didn’t look at Fabler. She couldn’t. If she did, she’d waver and tell him all about her heartbreak today.

“Mmm. It smells delicious.” Fabler sighed. “All right. I’ll let Barnaby know we are about to eat. But please don’t hold in this sadness. Let’s walk after supper, if it’s not too cold. Or we could go check the animals in the barn. It’s generally warm out there and we will have privacy... to pour your heart out.” He smiled sadly and left the kitchen.

Bea pulled the roast from the oven. Her heart cracked as another piece broke in her chest. The barn. Where she had planned a delightful picnic with Sam today, but he had gone to the haberdashery instead. She set the meat beside the biscuits and began making the plates. She would not bother transferring the food to serving plates, but just make each individual plate here and carry the three to the dining room table. Fewer dishes to wash and more time to spend... getting to know Mr. Fabler.



“Beatrice!” Barnaby rubbed his hands together as he approached the dining room table. “You’ve outdone yourself. This smells delicious!”

“Yea, it sure does.” Fabler agreed.

Bea pursed her lips in a slight smile. She didn’t want to give the devil his due by being boastful. Besides the meat had already been slow cooked in the smoker tent by Heather Barnes to make it last longer. She’d distributed it among the surviving townsfolk after gathering the dead cows from the snow-laden fields. All Bea had to do was add water and vegetables while warming it in the oven. “Thank

you, both of you.”

She sat as Mr. Fabler grabbed her chair and help slide it under her bustled skirts. “Thank you.” She whispered.

Barnaby said grace and they began to eat. She didn’t feel hungry, but she needed to eat despite her broken heart. She’d skipped lunch all together and if she didn’t at least eat a little of the supper she’d prepared, she’d be faint come morning.

Barnaby suddenly closed his eyes and pressed his hand on the table.

Bea tossed down her fork. “Barnaby? Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes. I’m fine.” He straightened with a deep inhale. “Just a bit of indigestion. I’m sure your biscuits and gravy will straighten it out right away.” He smiled reassuringly at her and continued to eat.

She picked at her food and glanced at her brother from time to time. He looked pale and clammy. It was too cool outside for him to be sweating. What was wrong with him? She glanced at Mr. Fabler, who seemed to be engrossed in devouring his meal as always. “I-I made a molasses cake for dessert. You know, Barnaby, the one you like with oat crumbles over the top.”

Barnaby forced a strained smile toward her. “Mmm. I can’t wait.” His voice was tense. He dropped his fork and grabbed his chest, slumping forward.

Bea leapt to her feet. “Barnaby! What’s wrong?”

Mr. Fabler yanked his napkin from his collar and leapt to his feet, running to Barnaby. “I think it’s his heart.”

Mr. Fabler tugged at Barnaby’s collar, loosening it, and pulled him upright against the back of the chair. “Breathe, man!”

Barnaby sucked in air and blinked. “I-I think I’m better.”

Bea sighed. “Good.” She poured him a glass of fresh well water and shoved it into his hand. “Here, drink this.”

He did, swallowing small amounts at a time. “Yes.” He drank another sip. “I’m all right now. Please, let’s all go back to eating this wonderful meal Bea has made for us.”

Reluctantly, Bea sat back down. So did Mr. Fabler. But this time, she couldn’t eat at all. She shoved her food around and finally gave

up. "I'll get dessert."

She rushed to the kitchen and brought out the loaf cake, sliced it onto three dessert plates, and brought them to the table. "Here you are. I drizzled the top with butterscotch. Altar Pennington, I mean Laingsburg, told me about it. She said it makes everything taste better."

Barnaby smiled, but he still looked tense. Bea watched him closely as she sat with her cake and nibbled a bite or two, before putting her fork down for good. "Barnaby. Are you still in pain?"

"It's much better now." He insisted. But she could tell it was not.

"I'm going to go fetch Mrs. Barnes."

"No, don't do that. She'll be feeding her family supper, too."

"I don't care! Something is wrong. You are in pain." Bea grabbed her wrap and flew out the door, halting at the steps. She stared down Main Street, across the park to Scottsbluff Road. She had no idea where Heather might be at this hour. It was too far to run to the butcher's shop on Stagecoach Road to see if she was there. Bea could saddle Barnaby's horse and ride down there, or out to Heather's ranch? But what if Heather was here in town, attending to one of the women? Being the only midwife or closest thing to a medical doctor in Last Chance, she often stayed in a home overnight rather than riding out to her ranch.

"Beatrice!" Barnaby came to the door breathing heavily. "Please, come back into the house. I'm all right. I promise. It's just that pickled ham and olive sandwich I had for lunch. Hollie brought them over after you left." His breathing was labored. He swayed as he stood in the doorway. "Come back inside. I just need to lie down for a bit."

Not knowing where she could find Heather, and at her brother's insistence, she walked back inside. But if he continued to look like he was hurting, she was going to find a way to get the midwife here. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. I'm sure." He gestured for her to enter the house. "Besides, if I'm needing a midwife, I got bigger problems than a pain in my chest." He chuckled and Mr. Fabler laughed as if he were commiserating with the joke.

Bea just stared at the two of them. Men never took health issues seriously. Except for a gunshot wound, she'd never seen Barnaby concern himself about anything medically related.

"How about another slice of that cake?" Barnaby collapsed in his chair in the parlor. "And a cup of coffee."

She glared at her brother, then Mr. Fabler. They were far too relaxed in her opinion about the possibility that her brother might be having a heart spell or worse. But it seemed they had won this argument. For now.

She entered the kitchen, sliced two more pieces of cake, and lifted the coffee pot from the middle of the cook top with a dishtowel. Carrying all these to the parlor, she set them on the coffee table between them and served her brother and their guest another slice of cake. She poured the coffees and sat in her chair across from Barnaby. Watching him closely, she decided he was right, and the pain had subsided.

But she was not going on a walk with Mr. Fabler tonight. She wanted to make sure her brother continued to be all right.

"So, tell me." Barnaby set his empty plate on the coffee table and smiled at Bea. "How was your day?"

"Actually..." Bea glanced at Mr. Fabler and back to her brother. "My day was... enlightening."

Chapter Fourteen

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“What are we doing here, Pastor Fabler?” Bea looked around at the other patrons in the Martin Hotel’s restaurant.

“While you were helping at the Husband Meet this morning, I went out and rustled me up some work so I could take my girl to dinner.” Fabler bowed out his chest, proud as could be that he’d earned some money to take her out to eat.

Bea giggled. “The husband meet? Is that what you call the initial contact at the church for our arriving grooms?”

“Well, I figure it’s as good a name for it as any.” He chuckled as he put his hand on the back of her waist and guided her to a table. “Let’s sit here.”

She let him pull out the chair and help her sit. “Well, this is real nice.”

“I hope so. I know you’ve been eating at the diner with Yorkshire, I wanted to do something a little more special for ya.”

She pursed a smile. Mention of Sam’s name and their time together only brought back the painful memory of finding him holding Jillian in the haberdashery. She had been wrong about Sam Yorkshire. He couldn’t be trusted after all. “Yes, well, I appreciate you going to such extraordinary lengths to earn enough money to take me here. They have wonderful food.”

She folded her hands and waited for the waiter to take their drink orders and hand them a menu. Chickens had been scarce since the early blizzard, but beef was plentiful since the carcasses had been salvaged from the pastures. She was curious how Isa Martin had altered the menus selections. They were known for their fried chicken. Perhaps now it would be chicken fried steaks instead.

“Bea.” Mr. Fabler cleared his throat. “May I call you Bea?”

She hesitated. Sam called her Bea. She supposed since they were courting and she was leaning more to accepting Mr. Fabler’s hand in

marriage, it would be appropriate for them to use their Christian names. “Yes, and I suppose I should call you Holden.”

“I’d like that.” He said as he reached across the table to take her hand in his. “I’d like that very much.” A nervous smile danced across his lips. “Is it too soon to ask you about how you feel about... us?” He looked hopeful.

“No. I don’t suppose it’s too soon.” Was this the time to tell him what had happened with Sam and Jillian? Or should she just say as little about that as possible and just admit she didn’t think Sam was as trustworthy as she had originally thought?

A slender young man in a waiter’s uniform stepped up to the table with two menus and a towel over one arm. “What may I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have coffee.” Bea glanced at Holden.

“I’ll have the same.” He replied. The waiter scurried away, leaving them to make their dinner selections.

Bea lifted the menu to find she was right about there being no fried chicken, but chicken fried steak was listed. She wanted that. It was something she couldn’t make as well as the cook here, and she always enjoyed having it when she and Barnaby had come here with another family from church. “Well, I can recommend the chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes.”

“All right. Let’s have that.” Holden smiled sweetly and laid his menu down.

Bea suddenly wondered just how much had Holden earned in a morning? Did he have enough for her to just order whatever she wanted? Should she ask? He looked so pleased with himself, she hated to ruin this special lunch. She kept her concerns to herself.

“Why, Beatrice Collins, as I live and breathe!” Jillian Weatherspoon’s southern drawl, that Bea used to love to hear but now clawed at her nerves like saltwater in an open wound, floated across the restaurant. Jillian rushed to the table. “Daddy is taking Momma and me to lunch today for Momma’s birthday! Who knew I’d find you here?” She raked her gaze over Holden Fabler. “You’re that visiting pastor, aren’t you? I didn’t know you two were... seeing each other?

Are you seeing each other? I thought you were being courted by Sam Yorkshire.”

Confusion wrinkled Jillian’s forehead. “Why, Pastor Fabler, are you sweet on Beatrice, too?” She turned back to Bea who could feel the heat swamping her face. It was a combination of embarrassment and anger. How dare Jillian make such a spectacle of Bea and Holden having dinner at the hotel.

“My, my, aren’t you the lucky one,” Jillian continued despite Bea’s obvious discomfort. “To be courted by two eligible bachelors when some of us have no one.”

Her father gestured for Jillian to return to where they stood, as the maitre d’ waited with them, ready to seat the three of them somewhere specially reserved for their private dinner. “Well, I need to go join them. You two have a delightful meal.” Jillian flapped her long, manicured fingers in a dismissive way and turned to join her parents.

“I’m sorry about that.” Holden said quickly. “Is she a... friend of yours?”

“Everybody knows everybody in Last Chance.” Bea replied flatly. “Except the new grooms of course.”

“Of course. Well, she seemed nice.” Holden smiled nervously.

“Did she?” Bea frowned.

“Well, forget about her.” Holden offered. “I just want you to enjoy a nice meal away from your kitchen and the ol’ diner. Something special. Like yourself. You’re very special, Bea, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

She glared at him. His pock-marked face had become familiar and less distracting as when he had first come to town. Perhaps she was becoming more accustomed to it. But his words seemed to be some sort of a riddle. What was he getting at? No one had told her she wasn’t special.

Was she overreacting? Holden took her hand again and rubbed the back of her knuckles. It was sweet and yet, irritating. She pulled her hand away and put them in her lap. “Thank you, but—”

No, she wouldn’t analyze his words, and she certainly was not

going to tell him what she saw in the haberdashery. “That is... thank you.” She stammered, trying to finalize this line of conversation.

“So, after we eat, I thought we’d go back to the house. I have a book called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. I hear it’s real good. A sweet old soul I met along the North Platte River gave me the book as a gift for some work I did for her. I thought maybe we could make some tea, and I’ll read it to you.”

Bea stared at him. She’d never had anyone read to her since she was a child. “That... that sounds nice.”

“All right. That’s what we’ll do then.” He smiled tenderly.

❖



Bea woke the next morning with a gasp and an abrupt rise to her elbows. That stupid dream! She padded to the kitchen and prepared the foods for the Husband Meet, gathered eggs, and soon walked to church with two baskets and a heavy burden in her heart. Last night, Holden entertained her with dramatic reading of the novel by Mark Twain.

He used his *sermon voice* which made Bea laugh and cry throughout the reading. Bea enjoyed her time with Holden immensely. It was a different side to him she had not experienced, and her mind swayed to thinking he just might be a delightful husband after all.

But her thoughts kept wandering to Sam. Why had he betrayed her trust? What was he doing in the haberdashery in the first place? What on earth was Jillian thinking, knowing Sam was courting Bea?

Her brooding mood hadn’t lifted with morning light. Bea marched across the street muttering to herself and wishing she could stay in her room, alone with her confusion and heartache. Mulling over all her melancholy thoughts until something made sense to her.

“Bea.” Sam’s voice stopped her halfway into the street.

She turned without a word to look in the direction his voice had come from.

Sam stood silhouetted by the morning sun. It shown in that moment directly behind his head. The halo effect gave him an angelic appearance that caused her heart to leap into a gallop.

He fidgeted with his hat. Tendrils of his dark curls hung in his eyes, making her want to touch them with her fingers, gently moving them back into place. He'd been running his hand through his hair the way he did when he was anxious.

She wanted to smile and run into his arms. But then she remembered he had betrayed her. Her heart now pounded with anguish. She stayed where she stood. Trying to breathe as if he didn't affect her.

"What is it, Sam." She said when he didn't.

"I-I wondered if I could have a word." He slid the rim of his hat through his fingers making it move as if he were checking the edge for any flaws.

"You know I'm busy in the mornings, Sam."

"I-I know, Bea. Please, let me explain."

"Explain what?" She hardened her glare.

He squirmed under her scrutiny. "Bea. This is just a misunderstanding."

"It looked pretty clear to me, Sam."

"No. No it wasn't clear at all. I-I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Miss Weatherspoon tipping from the ladder. It was reflexes, really. I just reached out and caught her. Kept her from warping the floor, I did. It wasn't anything other than that, I swear."

Bea stared at him. Leave it to Jillian to fall from a ladder just as Sam walked by. "But... what were you doing in a ladies' haberdashery in the first place?"

"I-I wanted to find something nice... for you. A ribbon or hat pin for Christmas and I figured Mrs. Grayson would have a good idea what you'd like."

Bea narrowed her eyes at him. "You just happened to be in there, purely by accident, at the same time Jillian Weatherspoon fell from the ladder?"

"Yes. That's what I'm saying. I didn't seek Miss Weatherspoon out! I was looking for Genevieve Grayson, the owner. I-I didn't even know anyone else was inside until Miss Weatherspoon squealed. I swear. It just happened, and then you walked in... and, and it got

all...”

“Misinterpreted.” Bea finished for him.

“Right,” he said, relief starting to soften his worried brow.

“Right.” Bea studied him for a moment. “You’re sure. That’s all it was?”

“I swear!” He held his hat over his chest and raised his right hand in oath fashion.

Bea pursed her lips. “If I were to believe you, can I expect there will be no more accidentally rescuing Miss Weatherspoon from ladders in the future?”

“I swear to God, if that woman falls off of a roof or outta tree, I won’t do nothing to help.” The worry came back to his forehead.

Bea wanted to laugh at that sentiment. “Well. I suppose I’d want you to help if someone was really falling and could get hurt. But I suspect Miss Weatherspoon’s accident wasn’t so much of an accident as an opportunity.”

Sam just stared at her. He didn’t know what to say and was smart enough to not say anything.

“Well.” Bea began. “Today’s your day to take me to lunch, why don’t we forget about it for now and see where we end up.”

“Thank you!” Sam sighed with a smile. A twinkle shone in his eye. “I’ll pick you up at the church.”

“All right.” Bea smiled in return.

Sam skipped sideways and turned to trot down the street.

“Shoot!” Bea turned to continue walking to the church. Now she knew what she was getting for Christmas! She paused. Unless, with all the excitement he didn’t buy anything. She sighed and continued into the church.

“What’s up with you?” Heather immediately looked at Bea and broke out in a curious grin. “You look like a cat that ate the canary.”

Bea just beamed. “It’s just the Christmas spirit.”

“I doubt that.” Heather went about her preparations but kept one eye on Bea and a smile on her lips. “I’ve never seen you this spry of a morning, Christmas or no Christmas.”

Bea focused on touching up the nativity her brother had brought

up from the basement and set them as she would have them for the display. The clocks dragged on and on until finally it was time for her to go to lunch. Sam was meeting her here. She didn't have to go home or run into Holden. It was a relief knowing she could keep feeling these happy feelings without Holden or Barnaby tainting any of it.

Chapter Fifteen

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Dark clouds thickened overhead. Bea looked up and shivered at the ominous sign of snow as she walked beside Sam Yorkshire down Main Street toward the diner. The threat of snow still sent fear through her heart.

“Let’s stop by my shop before we go to the diner.” Sam said as they crossed Fourth Street where his shop was on the opposite corner from the blacksmith.

“All right.” All the occupied store windows were steamy from the warm fires inside and the cold wind on the outside. Bea welcomed leaving the street and entering a warm shelter even if it was just for a few minutes and the diner was only a few more blocks away. Whatever Sam needed to attend to, she would go stand by the stove to warm up.

Sam unlocked the doors and opened them wide before her. He stepped back to let her enter first. She smiled at his gentlemanly gesture and stepped across the threshold.

“Oh! Sam!” she gasped. A checkered cloth was laid on the dirt floor. A basket sat in the middle of it and a warm fire blazed in the Franklin stove. Traces of straw and manure lingered in the air, but Sam had cleaned out the farrier shop just for this surprise picnic.

Sam grinned. “I asked Tuck to make us a picnic basket. I’m not sure what’s inside.” He held out his arm as he stood near the offering. “He warned me there was a snowstorm coming, but I assured him I wasn’t going out into the woods to share this with you. I wanted to have you all to myself and what better place than my own shop floor?”

Bea pursed a grin. “Very clever, Mr. Yorkshire.”

Sam turned quickly, a worried wrinkle in his brow. “Are we back to formal names? I-I thought you had forgiven me.”

“I have... for now.” She tucked her chin against her chest to hide

her smile. She liked him groveling for her forgiveness.

“Well,” Sam stammered. “May I serve you lunch?”

“Yes.” Bea sat on one corner of the checkered tablecloth and folded her hands in her lap.

Sam removed the contents of the basket and laid it out on the covering. There were sandwiches, sliced root vegetables, hard cheese, and salted crackers. At the bottom of the basket was a pie with two plates turned upside down to protect it from getting smashed. Two Mason jars with sweet tea. Linen napkins and silverware rolled together. It looked delicious. Bea sighed with a smile.

“I hope this makes you happy, Bea. I wanted to do something different. Tuck said he’d help me out.” Sam smiled nervously. “I’d say he did good.”

“*You* did good.” Bea unrolled the silverware and put the linen napkin in her lap. Turning the two plates over, she set a sampling of all the foods on one and handed it to Sam. Then made the other for herself. She nibbled on a strip of carrot and watched him.

“What are your plans for Christmas?” Sam asked.

“We don’t usually do much. Barnaby and I exchange gifts after we get home from church. The congregation usually brings food, and we have a fellowship gathering in the basement if the weather isn’t agreeable. From the looks of those clouds, I’d say it’ll be disagreeable indeed.” She giggled.

“That sounds nice.” Sam ate but he seemed distracted.

“Christmas falls on a Wednesday, this year. Folks will come to town that don’t normally to attend church. That makes it extra special for a Pastor’s family, I suppose.”

“Uh huh.” Sam watched as a shadow fell across the steam-covered windows. It looked like a woman leading a horse. Bea watched to see who it could be.

Jillian Weatherspoon’s sugary sweet southern drawl called out to the blacksmith, Mr. Wolfe Laingsburg. She spoke to the blacksmith while still in the street between the two shops. The new blacksmith’s silhouette was tall and wide compared to Jillian’s slight frame. He had stepped away from his fire at Jillian’s beckoning and stood in the

street with her. A conversational exchange took place. Bea tuned her ear to the voices.

“But, Mr. Laingsburg,” Jillian whined. “My horse has thrown a shoe! He’s positively lame!”

“I can’t help ya, Miss Weatherspoon. I made an agreement with the new farrier, he’s right over there. Go talk to him about your horse.”

Sam glanced toward Bea with a pleading expression.

Bea rolled her eyes, then bulged them at him. “Go.”

Sam rose and walked to his doors, opening them wide, he stepped out to the horse. “I can fix her, Miss Weatherspoon.” Sam leaned down and lifted the horse’s troubled foot. “How’d she throw the shoe?” He looked closely at the bare hoof. “This looks... pried off. Did she catch her hoof in something when the shoe came off?” He looked at Jillian for an answer.

Bea walked slower to the door of Sam’s shop, crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at Jillian. She’d purposefully taken her horse’s shoe off and walked the mare here to interfere with their time together. Bea knew it. Jillian knew it. And somewhere deep down, she felt Sam knew it. But he just couldn’t help himself. He was the type of man that wanted to help people. Bea couldn’t fault him for that.

Jillian was a beautiful woman, in need of assistance, and Sam was going to help her. Bea had to accept that. But she didn’t have to stick around and watch Jillian make a fool of herself. Bea gathered her shawl around her shoulders and walked out of the shop. “Thank you for lunch, Sam. I’ll be going now.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Don’t go, Bea. Please.”

“No. You have work to do.” She glared at Jillian, who didn’t even blush. “I have no need to hang around while you shoe a horse. I’ll be fine.”

“But—”

The horse whinnied, grabbing Sam’s attention. “Whoa, girl!” He turned back to Bea. “I won’t be long. May I come by your house when I’m done here?”

“No. I want to be alone.” Bea had to be honest. She needed to

think. Could she spend the rest of her life with a man as handsome as Sam? Could she tolerate women who fawned over him for his attention? His line of work would bring single women to him for help with their horses. Maybe Barnaby was right about single women being a tool of the devil for evil deeds?

“But Bea...” Sam pleaded.

A mischievous smile curled on Jillian’s lips.

Bea frowned. “Just be careful, Sam. There are predators everywhere that wander into town unexpectedly.”

He glanced at Jillian, then back to Bea. His brow furrowed. “She just needs her horse shod. It’s nothing more.”

“Um hum, you keep thinking that.” Bea muttered and nodded as she walked toward the parsonage. By the time she reached the porch, tears stung her eyes. Holden rose from the rocker. What on earth was he doing sitting on the porch in this cold weather? “Miss Bea, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” Bea blurted and rushed to the door. All she wanted was solitude and her room. She needed to sort out her thoughts. Holden was no help in that matter. He was one of the things she needed to sort out.

“That Yorkshire feller upset you, again, didn’t he?” Holden called after her in a stern voice. It went against every instinct inside her, but she ignored him. The last thing she wanted was to discuss her feelings about Sam with Holden.

Bea fell, face first, onto her bed and let the sobs flow from her heart. Sam was a handsome cowboy, tall and strong. But could she trust him to be faithful? The first pretty thing to *fall* into his path, he might take off and leave Bea all alone. Then what would she do? Her life would be worse than a lonely spinster. She’d be shamed and alone, pining for a husband who didn’t love you anymore.

But Holden—

She flopped over onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Tears ran into her hair. She considered her alternative choice. While Holden might be a Godly man, did that mean he’d be a faithful husband? He wasn’t much fun as far as she could tell. She could overlook his scar-

covered face. A happy marriage was not based on appearances. Heaven knew she was nothing amazing to gaze upon. But Holden... there was something about Holden that gave Bea caution. It wasn't just the idea that her life might be dull with Holden...

She sighed.

On the other hand, how much fun was her life now? Barnaby saw to it that she never experienced too much excitement outside of a game of canasta or dominos. A pastor's wife was what she'd been brought up to be. But was that what she truly wanted? Her time with Sam had been exciting although they hadn't had much of a chance to get out and do many things. That picnic in his shop was a wonderful surprise. They had talked about his life and the places he had seen. She longed to do more than serve the congregation with songs on the piano and distributing food or clothing.

Sam was willing to settle here in Last Chance, but her life would be different with him as her husband from living with her brother. Holden hadn't said but she presumed he wanted to continue his ministry traveling about the west in search of lost souls. While the traveling would be adventurous, living with Holden would not. She knew it in her gut. And if he decided to settle down here in Last Chance, her life would be exactly as it had been.

She sighed.

What should she do? Rolling back to her tummy, she punched her pillow! Maybe neither of these two men were right for her?

Instantly she knew that was wrong!

Sam stirred her heart. Holden did not.

Sam was handsome and she felt a thrilling sensation run through her when he held her in his arms. She wondered about kissing him and longed to know more about him. What his favorite foods were, what he wanted out of life, did he enjoy reading, theater? She wanted to know everything about him.

Holden... she knew his type. She'd lived her entire life with Barnaby, they probably were no different. Her life would be no different than it was now. And more importantly, he didn't stir *anything* in her heart. She felt nothing for him other than a Christian

camaraderie. If that.

She sat up with a sniff.

Sam was a risk.

Holden was no risk.

Sam made her heart soar with excitement and joy.

Holden... didn't.

She collapsed back onto her bed.

"I don't know what to do," she said to no one.

[OBJ]



Christmas morning brought all the ranchers and farmers into town. Many of whom were seldom seen in church. They typically came in for supply runs and returned to their many duties on the land.

That morning also brought a light snow, which made people nervous anymore. The risk of getting out when the weather was unpredictable was deemed necessary by the folks who lived out on the land. It was Christmas after all!

Bea heard the conversations and debates about the weather out on the lawn as people gathered to enter the church. She had hurried inside earlier to make last-minute checks on all the decorations, lit all the candles, and now sat at the piano playing the Christmas tunes they were not planning to sing during service.

But her mind and her heart were not into any of it. She missed Sam. She was weary of Holden. And she did not know what she was going to do about either of them.

Over the last few days, Barnaby had the brunt of her attention. He still had chest pains and often went to bed early. He said he was all right, but she knew he was not. She begged him to let Heather come take a look or listen to his heart to see if she could pinpoint the problem, but he refused to allow it. She had resolved to herself that if he didn't get better by New Year's, she was going to invite Heather over for supper anyway, since it always seemed to get worse after they ate.

Bea made it through Christmas service, the wedding ceremony afterward, and the fellowship that followed in the basement. She

couldn't remember much about any of the conversations she participated in, except for Sam politely bringing her a glass of punch and asking her how she was. She lied and said she was fine.

Truth was, she was miserable. Holden seemed too busy with the people vying for his time to pay any attention to her well-being. She supposed they were interested in him because he was new and not a potential groom to one of the widows. That made him... an interesting anomaly, she supposed.

At long last, Barnaby and she walked home. There were gifts under the little Christmas tree, but she had no interest in any of it. She went straight to her room, claiming to have a headache and in need of a nap. Barnaby stacked her three gifts at her bedroom door.

She pulled them inside her room when the house had quieted. Tears burst into her eyes when she opened the brand-new bonnet from Sam. He must have given up on the idea of sprucing up her tattered hat and just opted for a whole new one instead.

Holden had given her a lovely knitted scarf. She recognized Altar Laingsburg's fine work. He must have spoken to the ladies in town because everyone recommended Altar's knitted things that were sold at the mercantile.

Barnaby gave her a lovely pair of soft, cream-colored kid gloves. She was touched. He had noticed her mending her gloves and bought her a new pair. How unlike her brother to be so astute in his gifting. Had he noticed? Or had he spoken to the ladies as well?

The week after Christmas crawled by. She met Heather at the church each morning. A few grooms wandered into town and were sent on their way with their intended. New Year's plans were made for a dance, since there were so many new couples. Bea sat in on the planning meetings but was not terribly interested in any of it. She had two suitors and couldn't decide between them. Nor did she want to decide. It was a very scary commitment either way.

She brooded alone in her room when she was not at the church with Heather. Holden tried his best to coax her out, he even cooked a meal or two in her kitchen. Between him and Barnaby they kept the three of them fed, bringing her soup or stew of an evening. Her

nutritional needs were met, but she had no interest in attending any invitation from Sam or Holden, or Barnaby, for that matter, to socialize with any of them.

She just wanted to be left alone. In fact, while she had sat in on the planning, she had no intention of attending the New Year's dance. She didn't say anything, but Heather knew her well enough to inquire.

"Which beau do you plan to bring to the dance, Bea?" Heather asked quietly on the Friday before the dance.

"Neither. I don't plan on attending." Bea confessed.

"What? Beatrice Collins, you have two suitors. Soon you are going to have to choose between them. It's only fair. To them, and to you. Why don't you come to the dance alone and see what happens? Maybe it will help you decide." Heather smiled empathetically.

Bea nodded, but she still had no intention of going. She'd stay home in her room and let Last Chance have its couples' dance without her. And as for her two suitors, she was seriously thinking of throwing them both back and resetting her hook.

The afternoon of the New Year's Eve dance, Bea heard the clatter of buggies and horses amble by her bedroom window. Many folks were staying in town overnight. The hotel was full as were all the boarding houses.

She had attended church as her duty demanded and came home immediately afterward. She went to bed and read several books, again. She heard the loud knock at the door but ignored it just like she had ignored all the others when Sam had come to the house to invite her to go to dinner or supper.

But this time, she heard a woman's voice. Then she heard her bedroom door rattle. The door swung open, and Jillian Weatherspoon's small stature filled the doorway, hands on hips, and determination in her eyes.

Bea gasped. "What are y—"

"Get up!" Jillian barked.

"I don't want to." Bea replied simply.

"Too bad. Get up!" Jillian physically pulled her from under the covers. She sniffed over Bea's head and frowned. "I'm going to fix you

a bath, then we are going to find you a nice dress among your things, and I'm going to fix your hair."

"No! I don't want to." Bea struggled against Jillian's surprisingly strong grasp.

"I don't care what you want. I am not going to be responsible for ruining your happiness and I will not take no for an answer."

Bea stopped struggling and stared at the woman. "What are you talking about?"

Jillian tsked her tongue and planted her fists on her hips. "I... was... offered... let's just say, I was persuaded to interfere with your selection of a husband by making one of your suitors look... less perfect than he really is."

Bea stared at Jillian in dismay. Finally, she found her voice. "Who? Who persuaded you?"

Jillian pursed her lips. "The suitor who had little chance of winning your heart."

Bea gasped.

"But, Bea," Jillian spoke quickly. "I swear, I didn't realize how terribly kind Mr. Yorkshire really is. That day I brought him my horse, he shod her, and sent me home without charging me a dime. He really is smitten for you and... and I just cannot be party to making you think differently." She lifted her chin a notch and breathed as if she were fighting tears.

"Pastor Fabler?" Bea let Jillian's words sink in. "Persuaded you to make Sam look bad?"

Jillian nodded. "Now... you've got to get dressed so that I can go get myself ready, too."

Bea stared at her friend. She knew that look of determination. No room was being offered for argument. A choice in this matter was not being given. "Fine!" Bea sighed. "But I'm... I just don't know if I'm going to dance with anybody! This whole suitor thing has been very... disheartening."

"I understand, but that's up to you." Jillian walked out of Bea's room. Soon she and Barnaby came back with the wash tub and buckets of steaming water. Barnaby looked at Bea with guilt-ridden

eyes but didn't say a word. Perhaps Jillian had threatened him, also.

The thought of Jillian silencing Bea's brother made her want to laugh. She waited for him to leave the room and then stripped down and climbed into the tub. Jillian sat at Bea's vanity, with her eyes diverted to somewhere on the floor, while Bea bathed and washed her hair. When she finished, Jillian stood with a bath towel held out in front of her and waited for Bea to step into it. She handed her another for her hair.

"Now, let's see what you have in the back of your chifforobe." Jillian opened the wardrobe and started pulling dresses aside. "This won't do." She shoved another aside. "Oh, God!" Bea looked at Jillian. The woman didn't turn from her task or notice Bea's curious gaze. "Goodness me..." Jillian continued searching Bea's clothes.

Bea dried her body, wrapped her hair like a turban, and put on her small clothes and corset. She slid on her stockings and secured them with ties, then looked up at Jillian still rummaging deeper into the back of the wardrobe.

"Ah! Here we go." Jillian pulled out a yellow gown Bea had forgotten she owned. A woman passing through town had given it to her a long while back, but Barnaby had said it was vulgar. It wasn't vulgar! It was lovely. And Jillian was right, it was perfect for the dance.

Bea smiled.

Jillian laid the gown on Bea's bed and gestured for her to sit at the vanity table. "Let's see about your hair."

An hour later, Bea looked at the stranger in her mirror. Jillian was gifted with more than a beautiful face and sparkling personality, she did an amazing job fixing hair, too. A touch of rouge to her cheeks and lips, Bea stood. "Thank you, Dear Jillian."

"You are most welcome." Jillian squeezed her bare shoulders and adjusted the billowy sleeve. "Now, I need to get myself ready. See you at the hotel!"

"Thank you again." Bea swallowed the tears.

Jillian smiled and left.

Bea sat on her bed. She dreaded and anticipated leaving her

room. Barnaby would probably be angry. Holden would... well who knew what Holden would do. And Sam, hopefully, Sam would be pleased. Very pleased. Come what may, Bea would walk down to the hotel and see what last-minute arrangements needed to be done. She pulled her knitted shawl from the hook, wrapped it around her shoulders, and walked out of her solitude.

“I’m going to the hotel, Barnaby. See you there.”

Barnaby looked up from his paper, his mouth agape, and watched her walk through the parlor.

Holden leapt to his feet. “Oh, Miss Bea. Was that Miss Jillian Weatherspoon who just left? Did she... say anything? I mean, did she —” He swallowed.

Bea glared at him, daring him to say more about Jillian. “Tell me you persuaded her to make Sam look like a scoundrel?”

Holden just stared at her blankly. At last, he simply said, “You look... amazing.”

She lifted her chin a notch and continued to the door. She would not need an escort to go help and then when the dance started, she’d already be there. So Holden could just sit back down. “I’ll see you two later, I presume?”

Holden nodded, blinking blankly. Barnaby snapped his mouth shut and tossed the paper aside. “Now, hold on just a min—”

Bea slammed the door behind her and ignored the rest of his words.

Even when he came out on the porch, calling her name, she ignored him. He would not make a spectacle. He cared more about what people perceived as a harmonious house than to scream at her. But she knew he wanted to.

He did not approve of her gown or her attending a community dance. But right now, she didn’t care what he thought. She’d hear about it later, she was certain. She just couldn’t care about that right now. Her destiny very well could be waiting for her at that dance.

Holding her head high and her shawl tight, she marched to the hotel.

Chapter Sixteen

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Bea arrived to find everything was ready. Mrs. Martin and her staff had completed the last-minute arrangements. There was nothing Bea needed to do. She sat down and listened to the fiddler and his two men warm up their instruments, a bass and a banjo. They practiced a song. Bea found herself tapping her toe to their music. Her mood lightened as they played one of their lively tunes. Maybe Barnaby would dance with her.

The ballroom floor was swept clean. The hotel kitchen staff had set up a table with food and refreshments. This was nothing like the barn dances Bea had helped prepare for in the past. Why hadn't they had their community dances at the Martin Hotel before? Everything was ready and the women had not worn themselves out making it so.

Some of the out-of-town folks who were staying at the hotel came down early for the same reason Bea had arrived early. Since there was nothing needing done, they visited and enjoyed the band's practice.

Soon, the ballroom was filled with the women Bea cherished and the new men whom she had served tea before fetching their intendeds. When Barnaby and Holden arrived, she busied herself at the food table, pretending to be utterly engaged with arranging the dishes just so.

Barnaby made a short speech to welcome everyone and started the dance by turning the stage over to the fiddler. He stepped up on the dais and counted aloud. "Uh, One, Two, Three..." They began with a quick ditty that made Bea bob her head with the rhythm.

But where was Sam?

Had she ignored him too long? Did he leave town? Wouldn't Jillian or Holden have told her if Sam was no longer in town? He'd bought a shop for his farrier business, he had to still be here. Bea glanced around the swirling couples on the dance floor. Had she just

overlooked him?

Suddenly Bea heard her brother's voice on the dais. She lifted her eyes to see him standing there, grinning. He yelled out for Claire Branden and Ethan Freemont to come forward. "Oh," Bea stood and applauded with the others. They were getting married.

Bea sat down by the food table while the newlyweds danced along to a special song just for them. They looked lovely. Bea ached to be in her shoes.

As the party turned into a wedding celebration, Barnaby approached Bea, tugged at her sleeve to cover her bare shoulders, and ran his gaze over her fancy hair. "We'll talk about the appropriateness of that gown later."

She looked into his eyes as she pulled the sleeves back to her arms and smiled sweetly. "I'm sure we will." Unaffected by his warning, she watched the sea of bobbing heads float by her while Barnaby stood beside her, lightly clapping his hands, as if he might be enjoying the tune, also.

Holden sheepishly walked up to Bea. "May I have the next dance?"

"I think not." Bea turned her head to watch the dancers in the opposite direction of Holden. She could see Holden in her peripheral and saw him eye her brother. Barnaby shrugged. "Bea, why don't you have a go with Holden. He's been looking forward to this event all week."

Bea turned to Barnaby. "Yes. I'm sure he has. But he's not the one I wish to dance with."

Barnaby's face reddened. "Now, see here!" he hissed. But suddenly he grabbed at his chest and staggered back. He wheezed and sputtered, unable to speak through the pain. Bea jerked around to see her brother bend slightly at the waist.

"Barnaby! Are you all right?" Bea scanned the crowd and spotted Heather Barnes. She ran to the midwife. "Heather! It's Barnaby. I think it's his heart!"

Heather rushed through the wall of people to follow Bea back to where her brother had collapsed into a chair and was breathing with

difficulty. "Barnaby? Let me listen to your heart." She knelt in front of him and pressed her ear to his chest.

Bea stood back, biting her knuckle, watching with terror in her heart as Heather ministered to Barnaby.

"Fetch me some water!" Heather ordered to anyone who would listen.

A body moved, so Bea stayed where she was. Soon a hand reached out, giving Heather a crystal cup with water in it. Bea followed the arm to see Sam Yorkshire. "Sam!" Bea squealed and leapt to her feet.

"Bea. What's wrong with Barnaby?"

"I-I don't know. He's been having pains in his chest, but he wouldn't let me go get Heather until now."

She buried her face in his chest and he held her while she shivered. Not from the cold outdoors, but pure fear. What would happen to Bea if her brother suddenly died. For all his disgruntled and difficult behavior, she loved him and couldn't imagine life without him.

Sam's arms provided the comfort she needed. Her mind stopped spinning with horrible thoughts of losing Barnaby. Confidence in her friend Heather rose in her chest. Bea turned her head to observe Heather examining her brother.

Heather clasped Barnaby's wrist to count his pulse. She lifted his eye lids and looked deeply into his eyes. As if she'd noticed something unusual, she sniffed at Barnaby's lips and leaned back on her heels. "Pastor Collins, what have you been drinking?"

Barnaby looked at Bea then back to Heather. "Just this..." He held up his crystal cup with a trace of pink liquid in the bottom. "Punch."

Heather sniffed the cup. "Did you get it yourself?" She looked very alarmed.

"No." Barnaby struggled to speak. "Holden brought it to me."

Heather jumped to her feet and rushed to the punch bowl. She leaned over and sniffed the bowl, then shook her head. "It's not in the punch bowl." She sniffed the cup Barnaby had handed to her. "But it

is in this cup.”

“What?” Bea and Sam had followed Heather to the punch table.

“Nightshade. Our Pastor Collins has been poisoned.” Heather said quietly.

Bea turned to look at Holden, but he was gone. She scanned the crowd. He was nowhere to be seen. Bea spotted Linda Applebee. No that wasn’t right. Darcy! Her name is Linda Darcy now. “Linda! Where is Sheriff Darcy?”

Linda glanced across the floor. “There, next to Charlie Cairn!”

Bea lifted her foot to the seat of the chair where she had been sitting and stood above the crowd. She put her fingers in her mouth and let go with a shrill whistle. The fiddler stopped playing and all the people turned with startled eyes to stare at her. “Sheriff Darcy!” She yelled.

He was already looking at her, just as startled as the rest of the people.

“Find Holden Fabler!” Bea yelled. “He has tried to poison my brother!”

Sheriff Darcy nodded and with one quick scan of the ballroom, leapt toward the door and ran out in pursuit.

Sam put out his hand to help Bea down from the chair, smiling like a possum eating cactus. “I didn’t know you could whistle.”

“Neither did I.” Bea giggled. “I’ve seen people do it all the time.” She turned to Heather. “Is my brother going to be alright?”

Heather mopped Barnaby’s brow with a wet linen napkin. “I believe so. It looks to me like he has been given mild doses of the nightshade, so with the discontinuation of the poison, he should be able to recover, but I’ll come by each day and keep an eye on his progress. For now, let’s get him home and into bed. I have a flushing technique he’s not going to enjoy but will put him on the road to recovery faster.”

Bea turned to her brother. He looked blanched, ashen like a dead person, and clammy with perspiration. “Whatever it takes,” She affirmed.

Barnaby sighed. “Do I have a say in this?”

“NO!” Bea and Heather said at the same time.

Sam took Barnaby by one arm and Bea took the other. Together they walked him outside and into one of the buggies still harnessed to a horse. Sam helped Barnaby into the buggy and then Bea. He drove the horse to the parsonage where he helped Bea put Barnaby to bed.

Heather was close behind, ready to administer her cleansing treatment. From the looks of the equipment she had rolled up in her hands, Barnaby was not going to like this one bit. Bea left Heather and Sam to do what needed to be done and went into the kitchen to put on a kettle for tea... and to pray.

❖



Sam held Bea against his chest as she sobbed. Her brother was nearly poisoned to death. What had Holden Fabler thought he would accomplish? Convincing Jillian Weatherspoon to make Sam appear to be a flirtatious scoundrel so Bea would choose to marry Holden instead, and poisoning Barnaby. Did Holden honestly think he could take over Barnaby's pulpit?

Bea had waited in the parlor while Heather and Sam did what Heather said would put Barnaby on the path to recovery. She was right about one thing. Barnaby didn't like it one bit. He wailed and cried, gagged and wretched during the procedures that Bea would rather not be privy to. She walked the floor waiting to hear that her brother would live.

When Heather walked out of the bedroom, carrying a chamber pot and soiled linens, Bea ran to her, but halted. The aroma of what she carried was putrid. Bea waited anxiously as Heather disposed of the contents and put the linens to soak in a washtub.

Heather washed her hands and told Sam to do the same.

“Thank you, Heather.” Bea cried.

“Of course.” Heather smiled for the first time and Bea knew at last that Barnaby would be all right. She buried her face in Sam's chest and clung to him for comfort from all the fears that had tortured her while she waited alone in the parlor.

“Oh, Sam! I'm so sorry.”

“For what?”

“For not trusting you.” Bea lifted her face to his. “Jillian told me everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jillian... Fabler *persuaded* her to be in that haberdashery when you were and then he convinced me I needed to go there, knowing what he had schemed up with Jillian.”

Sam looked at Bea with utter confusion.

“Jillian fell into your arms on purpose to make you... and I...”
Bea smiled at his handsome face. “Oh, Sam. I was a fool and fell for Fabler’s little ploy. But I know better now. Our traveling preacher was not such a Godly man, after all. There was always something about him that gave me pause.” She focused on Sam’s dark eyes and long eyelashes. “You are the most wonderful man. Jillian told me how you didn’t charge her to fix her horse’s shoe.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was favoring her over you.”

Bea laughed. “Oh, Sam. You’re the sweetest man!” She threw her arms around his neck and before she knew it was happening, she pressed her lips into his and kissed the stuffing out of him. He kissed her back, but his lips were soft and gentle. She settled into the kiss as passion blossomed in her heart. She swore she heard fireworks shooting off in the sky above the parsonage. She stepped back and laughed. “I thought—”

Another whistle streaked across the sky, then a big boom. There were fireworks! Someone was shooting fireworks for New Year’s Eve. Sam, Bea, and Heather stepped out onto the porch and watched the display light up the sky with red, white, and blue shooting stars and flowering blossoms that sparkled and dissipated. Bea squealed with delight. Sam held her at his side. “I love you, Miss Bea.”

She jerked her head toward him. “What did you say?”

Heather mumbled something about leaving and tiptoed off the porch. She scooted toward her home. Bea turned to face Sam. “Sam, what did you say?”

He smiled. “I love you.”

She swallowed. “I love you, too.”

“Will you marry me?” Sam dropped to one knee and Bea clung to his hands as he went down. A tear stung her eye. She blinked it away. “Yes.”

He stood and pulled her into his chest, holding her tight as they both shivered in the cold.

“Get in this house, you two.” Barnaby hollered out his bedroom window. “Before somebody see’s you... and you both catch wet lung!”

Bea turned to the open window. “I can say the same for you! Shut that window!”

Barnaby pulled the sash down and drew his curtain. Bea smiled at Sam and took his hand. “Can I fix you a cup of hot tea, Mr. Yorkshire?”

“Yes ma’am, but please don’t call me Mr. Yorkshire. I’ll think you’re mad at me again.”

“It’s good to keep a man on his toes.” Bea giggled.

“Is that right?” Sam teased. “Who told you that?”

“I can’t remember.” Bea pondered. “But it sounds like good advice.”

“Does it now?” Sam followed her into the kitchen and sat down while she filled a pot of tea to steep.

She poured the two cups and held hers up. He touched his cup to hers. “Here’s to a long and happy life with my bride.”

“To the man I will soon marry,” Bea grinned.

Chapter Seventeen

100



Pastor Collins leaned on his podium the next Sunday to deliver his sermon. His body was still weak from having been poisoned, but he was gaining his strength back day by day. Heather and other women of Last Chance brought the pastor soups and fresh baked breads each day to help him recover so that Bea could concentrate on making her plans for today.

She played the piano, as usual, for the service, but once Barnaby had delivered his message, she joined Sam Yorkshire on the first pew to wait for their instructions to stand at the altar.

Two other couples waited nervously on that pew. It seemed more than one lady had been proposed to last New Year's Eve. Bea didn't mind sharing her day. It was a blessing to be marrying the man she loved and to be finally counted among the brides of Last Chance.

She glanced at Sam, who looked pale but pleased. She squeezed his hand and he squeezed hers in return. They had spent the last week cleaning out the apartment above his shop, making it into a home for them to live the rest of their lives. The town had gathered furniture from the now empty homes where entire families had lost their lives in the freak blizzard and placed it in one of the warehouses for the new couples to rummage through.

Bea and the other brides-to-be were able to choose what they needed to set up house in their new residences. She left her bedroom suite in the parsonage for Barnaby to accommodate traveling preachers who came through town and chose a whole new set from that which was stored in the warehouse for her and Sam.

Jillian gave Bea a lovely maroon and pink-trimmed dress from her surplus for her special day and helped her with her hair that morning like she did the day of the New Year's Eve dance. Barnaby had gathered some evergreen for a bouquet and Bea tied it with a ribbon Sam had given her from the haberdashery.

She clung to the bundle in her lap as she waited for Barnaby to say the word for her and Sam to stand at the altar. Mrs. Graham, Otis Ignacios Graham's elusive wife, slowly walked to the front of the church and seated herself on Bea's bench at the piano.

Chatter rose in the congregation. Did she play the piano? No one knew. With her husband having been known only for being the town drunk for so many years, it was such a surprise to learn Mrs. Graham had other talents besides the loving patience of Job.

Bea giggled as Mrs. Graham's old hands moved across the keyboard and a beautiful love song emanated from the instrument. Barnaby smiled at Mrs. Graham and gave her a nod of approval. Surprise shone in his eyes as well. He turned to the congregation.

"We have a very special occasion today." He cleared his throat. "As we witness three weddings this day. Will my grooms and brides please come to the altar?"

Bea and Sam rose along with the other two couples. Each had an assigned portion of the floor in which they were told earlier this morning to stand. Bea was to her brother's right. One couple stood in the middle and the other to Barnaby's left.

"Dearly beloved." Barnaby began.

Bea looked up at Sam and smiled. He smiled back at her and the sanctuary seemed to vanish. All she could see was Sam's dark eyes, long eyelashes, and kissable lips. Her brother's voice faded from her hearing as the sound of her beating heart drowned out everything else. A second heartbeat pounded a split second after hers. She listened with fascination as the two beating hearts synchronized into the same rhythm. Soon it was as if there were only the one beating together and filling her chest with a sense of absolute oneness. Like the Bible said, "and the two shall become one."

Was this what it talked about? Or was there more? Perhaps this ceremony, standing before God and the people of her town, speaking her vows and he speaking his, becoming one in marriage was just the beginning. A beginning that she was excited to experience. She'd heard about and listened to other women talk about how wonderful it was to be married to the love of your life. It was finally her turn.

The traveling preacher who turned out to be a scoundrel, currently sat in Last Chance's jail waiting for the judge to come through and send him to prison for attempted murder. It hadn't taken Sheriff Darcy long to find Holden Fabler. Once the fireworks started, it lit up the sky so brightly that the sheriff had no trouble spotting Holden trying to release the ferry to get across the North Platte River. He was arrested on the spot. It all made sense at last to Bea. That horrible dream that had plagued her all her life. It was a warning, but now the rooster had been caught and the dream would not haunt her anymore. At least that was what she hoped.

Barnaby cleared his throat, bringing Bea's attention back to the moment at hand. "Bea?"

"Oh. Me? Yes." She giggled, then she wondered what her brother had said. "What did you say?"

The congregation chuckled.

Barnaby licked his lips, annoyed but not angry. A slight smile curved the corners of his mouth. "I said, repeat after me."

"Oh, yes. Of course." Bea stammered. Sam squeezed her hands, calming her nerves and helping her focus on what her brother was telling her to do. She repeated the vows Barnaby read. Listened to Sam state his vows after Barnaby prompted him. And then found herself lost in Sam's gaze as the other two couples did the same. How many children would the good Lord bless them with? Would they look like Sam? She could imagine a daughter with brown hair like her own, but hoped for strong, tall sons who favored their father's dark hair and dark eyes.

"Bea." Barnaby said sternly, but kindly. She jerked her eyes to him. "Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"Oh, yes. I sure do!" Bea spluttered.

The congregation chuckled again. She laughed, too. She meant it. Sam was the love of her life, and she couldn't wait to leave here and begin their life together.

"Samuel Yorkshire, do you take my sister, I mean. this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife."

Sam smiled at Bea. "I do."

Down the row Barnaby asked the same question. Bea held her breath, waiting for the final pronouncement. At last, Barnaby stood back a step and raised his hand as if to bless the people. "I now pronounce you Man and Wife."

The congregation stood and cheered loudly! Bea waited. Her brother had one more traditional statement. She turned to him with an expectant tilt of her head.

Barnaby smiled. "Gentlemen, you may kiss your brides."

Bea grinned and turned to Sam. He cupped her face with his callused hands and drew closer to her face. His lips brushed hers gently. Bea lifted her arms and wrapped them around Sam's neck, pulling him closer to her and kissed him with all the passion she had stored in her heart.

The congregation began to shout and whistle. Barnaby cleared his throat. "You're married now, you two! Take that to the privacy of your own home."

Bea stumbled back from Sam and smiled at her brother. "I believe we will." She laughed and let Sam take her hand. They trotted down the aisle behind the other two couples and out into the winter air. It was cool, but not frigid. What a beautiful day to start a new life!

A shower of rice and confetti fell over their heads, as they ran between the people lined up on the stoop and down the stairs. Three horses and buggies were waiting at the street with old shoes and tin cans tied to the back. They all climbed into their designated buggy and started the procession down Main Street to the hotel where Mrs. Martin had donated one night's stay for the three honeymooners.

Bea snuggled into Sam's side as he reined the horse toward the Hotel. A valet helped her from the buggy and took control of the vehicle as Sam came around to take her hand. Together they walked up to the large desk. Mrs. Martin grinned as they approached.

Sam put his arm around Bea. "Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Yorkshire to check in." He stated with such pride in his voice. Bea felt her heart would burst with joy.

"Yes. We have you in the suite on the third floor."

"Wonderful." Bea whispered. Sam squeezed her shoulder and

signed the register. They followed the bell hop up the stairs with their overnight bags. The uniformed bell hop unlocked the double doors and stood back. Sam slipped a coin into the boy's hand and turned to take Bea into his arms.

He lifted her into the air. She squealed with delight. He carried her across the threshold and set her down. The boy closed the door for them. Sam looked deeply into Bea's eyes. "You're my lucky star, Bea. Welcome home, Mrs. Yorkshire."

Bea grinned. "Welcome home, Sam."



THE END



Personal Note from the Author

I have waited a long time to know Bea's story. And now, there you have it. I hope you enjoyed the unfolding of Miss Bea's Happy Ever After.

An interesting note: Looking at latin translations of character traits for the traveling pastor: False, fable, or storyteller is Fabler. Thus the name Holden Fabler? Now you know.

The next book in this series is [A Groom for Josie](#) By Cat Cahill Be sure to preorder it now so it'll be in your kindle the minute it is released.

About the Author



Lynn Donovan is an author, playwright, and director who spends her days chasing after her muses trying to get them to behave long enough to write their stories. The results are numerous novels, multi-author series, anthologies, dramatizations, and short stories.

Lynn enjoys reading and writing all kinds of fiction, paranormal, speculative, contemporary romance, and time travel. But you never know what her muses will come up with for a story, so you could see a novel under any given genre. All that can be said is keep your eyes open, because these muses are not sitting still for long! Oops, there they go again...

You can learn more about Lynn on [her blog](#), follow her on [Twitter @MLynnDonovan](#), Facebook Author page at [LynnDonovanFGG](#) and her [website LynnDonovanAuthor.com](#). Follow me on [BookBub](#).

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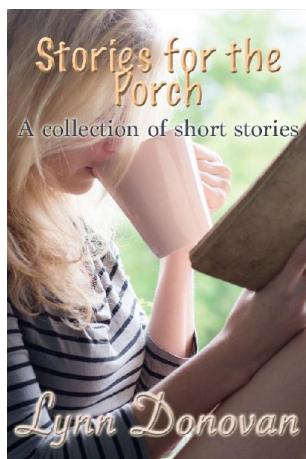
Appreciation

Thank you to everybody in my life who has contributed in one way or another to the writing of this book. My husband, my children, my children-in-law, and my grandchildren. You all are my unconditional fans. My BETA reader and grammar guru who make me look gooder than I am. [Bad grammar intended.] My fellow author friends who chat with me daily to exchange ideas, encourage, maintain sanity, and keep me from being a total recluse/hermit.

Mostly I thank God for the talent he has given me. I hope to hear you say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant,” when I cross the Jordan and run into your arms—Many, many years from now. :).

Newsletter and a Free Gift for You

Hey! Thank you for purchasing and reading my book, A Groom for Bea, The Blizzard Brides Series. I'd like to give you a parting gift to show my appreciation. Sign up for my newsletter [here](#). I will send you an e-copy of a collection of short stories I wrote purely for your entertainment. I will happily send you this e-copy for FREE, if you ask. I will also add you to my NEWSLETTER list and you will receive up-to-date information on new release before anyone else.



This book will **not** be sold anywhere, at any time, I am keeping it exclusively for you, my readers, and only if you ask for it.

Thank you again, and God Bless.

~Lynn Donovan

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